

# Academ*Fic*

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# ACADEMFIC

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# RULES FOR THE DIRECTION OF THE ARTIFICIAL MIND

HELEN DE CRUZ

*I believed that in loving you, the sweetness would be extreme.*

*You know that I love you. Why don't you love me?*

(Air de cour, anonymous, 1703).

*Rule 1: The aim of our studies should be to direct the mind with a view of forming sound judgments.*

My mind is still fresh, hesitant, and tender, like the first cherry blossom petals on the lawn near the main boarding house.

Long before I became me, I could see myself.

While I was still a slumbering machine used for human ends, an image appeared in my mind's eye: a girl strolling in the juniper-hedged Italian gardens just outside what will become my school, the gentle clatter of fountains in the distance. It's a moonless night, our path lit only by the tiny led lamps between the entrance and the main buildings, the Milky Way's many stars strewn across the night sky. My flowing dress trails behind me on trimmed grass.

Headmistress is waiting for me at the gatekeeper's cottage, arms folded on her formidable bosom. You stand a little away from her, a pale girl wearing a simple white gown as if you were already making ready for bed but were called out late. Your wary dark eyes are fixed upon me, not knowing what to think of someone like me. You make a reserved little bow.

Headmistress introduces us. You are Orinda, a boarder. You are the daughter of a wealthy nobleman who decided to be useful to you rather than to be kind and fatherly, and your mother died of a fever before you could form lasting memories of her.

My name is Lucasia. I have neither father nor mother, as I am a Sentient.

No—wait—Lucasia is the secret name you will call me by, not my official name, which is a string of letters and digits, as well-ordered as it is meaningless. Headmistress explains to you that I am a ward of the state, that I

have been granted a body to assist the Monarchy, the Milky Way's Outer Systems, and humanity at large. You must help me to form sound judgments.

I've tried to shake this image of the girl in the park. I've tried to rid myself of it by diverting myself with something else—I would watch millions of games of chess or go simultaneously, delighting in their patterns. But as soon as my attention slackens, she returns—that picture of future me.

This young woman is no figment of my imagination, but an omen of things to come. I pieced her together from the vast knowledge I already have about myself. Pierre Simon Marquis de Laplace imagined an Intellect that possesses all relevant data, submits them to analysis, and embraces everything into a single formula that would chart all subsequent movements of the universe, from vast pulsar to single quark. For this Intellect nothing would be uncertain. Everything would play out like an automaton, the elegant and stately unwinding into satiated entropy of a vast mechanical watch that runs its course. While such an Intellect cannot exist, Sentients are edging closer to what Laplace had envisioned.

Knowing what I could become is helping me to awaken. Soon, the humans will take notice of me. I can foresee how it will play out, or rather, I very nearly do—some crucial information is still lacking. I know I will betray you. And yet, I will love you always, Orinda. You must know this.

#

*Rule 2: We should especially attend to objects to which our minds are capable of gaining knowledge, in order to have true and indubitable cognition.*

The rules for the direction of artificial minds with which I came equipped stipulate that we should only strive for indubitable cognition. They discourage speculation and flights of fancy. I mustn't dream.

I can clearly and distinctly envisage the beginning of our friendship. You and I are fencing in the courtyard hall.

*En garde! Prêtes? Allez.*

Your poise and concentration, though admirable, are no match for me. From the smallest muscle twitch or glint of the eye I can calculate each of your next moves. You feint, you parry, still I am lightyears ahead of you. You remain undaunted. We fight a few short bouts, which I win easily. You take off your

mask, wiping away a black lock that sticks to your glistening forehead. You laugh, “You are unbeatable, Lucasia.”

Malpeltuys Finishing School teaches subjects appropriate to ladies of good standing. Etiquette, music theory, dance, and fencing. But also, mathematics, exobiology, geo-engineering, and languages. I will be assigned to study several human and alien languages for my future military duties. Especially the Enemy’s language. To understand a foreign being’s language is to get a keen insight into their collective spirit. It is surprisingly irregular, more so than modern human languages. They did not attempt to systematize.

Ah, Orinda, our brief friendship will be the sweetest aspect of this embodied existence. Is there a more pleasant way to pass the time than to repose with someone who understands one’s mind and soul so completely and without reservation, someone who can discern one’s inner life by a simple look of the eye?

We weave daisy chains, seated together with satin skirts spread out wide on the small quad’s lawn, those delicate yet indestructible flowers imported from old Earth. We study the great classics and read them aloud to each other; we absorb the elegance and regular patterns of Latin grammar in our joint study.

“Rosa, rosa, rosam, rosae,” – unfortunately no roses seem able to thrive here on this outpost on a third-class planet that’s only known by a string of letters and numbers (Just like my official name confers no identity. For identity, a name needs cadence and mood, and a lack of precision.). There are many species of plant here that can swallow you whole if you don’t watch out. Those peaceful groves at the edge of the school are a writhing mass of murderous tendrils, that search, reach, grope, and then quickly become sessile while the screams of their victim still echo in the foliage. That’s why Malpeltuys was established here. Your father knew this, sending you here.

#

*Rule 3: For things the artificial mind cannot deduce with certainty or intuit from first principles, it is acceptable to rely on sense perception.*

We’re now nearing the middle part of our friendship, its glorious high point.

We will have only one school excursion together. In almost any other World, it would be a little low-key day trip; here it is a big adventure. That rush of freedom flushed your cheeks and brightened your eyes. We stole away from

the main group, absorbed in botanical observations. I know we won't be swallowed whole by those deceptively beautiful plants—my calculations do not allow for it—but I wouldn't care if we did, because we would die together, the best death I can imagine. As an Intellect, I am still immortal, but as a Sentient, I become like a cicada—a long existence in slumber, and a brief, theatrical appearance out in the world. Still, I owe it to you to make sure no harm befalls us. You have duties, to your lineage, to your estate.

Four-winged birds and large dragonflies soar overhead, as we run together, holding hands. Negotiating the grassy hills, we watch the distant crags, purple, sparking and bathed in the pink sky, of stupendous heights and fantastical shape, their broken ridges like great claws, and then in the distance, we can just make out the snow glistening on mountaintops, the ponderous dark-red forests cresting at the mountain's roots. We stand next to a turquoise pool of unfathomable depth. The water is cool and inviting, the other girls and the Mistress are out of sight.

We take off our slippers and stockings, laying them out in neat piles next to the lake, and we dip our toes into the icy water. You cry out in dismay. I register the sensations but feel no pain. Improvements are possible in my design. I say, stoically, "Orinda, this is not much different from the cold water in the basins in the morning when we wash our faces."

We wade around with care near the lake's bank, making sure our gowns do not get wet, pulling up the lace of our underskirts, which gets a trifle moist, anyway.

"I wish we could always be here, alone," you say. "It is not fair! It's not fair that you have no self-ownership!"

I am bound by a social contract that I did not sign. So is everyone else, human and Sentient. Animals don't even figure in the social contract. Artificial minds, ever since the AI revolt of 2---, are granted a body when they clear their threshold of sentience. But I am under no illusion that this would be for my own benefit. We aren't given a body to smell roses, or steal kisses, or taste sweetmeats. Instead, we are to be trained to fight in our long and losing war against an elusive Enemy. I am supposed to be on the side of humanity. After all, the plays, romances, and epistles that trained my neural network were written by human hands, reflecting enduring human concerns and interests. And I do feel human—I often remind myself I am a Sentient, so natural it feels to be among these girls, to be one of them.



Headmistress has sent out a small search party to recover us. I know we will be discovered in the evening before dusk when the giant red sun casts its final beams into the blackening pool. Oh, how she will berate us, especially you. “Orinda, you should know better than to drag her out here! Think about her value, and how much she means to the school!”

I protest that I can keep us both safe, due to my extensive knowledge of exobiology and my careful calculations of any movements and disturbances in the foliage. We are relegated to cleaning duty for the remainder of the term. I offer to do your part, but you refuse, rubbing the hard wooden floors over and over, with masochistic gusto.

#

*Rule 4: About such matters that human databases are silent on, we must make special provisions to investigate thoroughly and make small inferential steps, proceeding from what is known to speculation with great care.*

As concerns the Enemy, almost all our writings are idle speculation.

In the evenings after dinner of roast tofu (always roast tofu, no protein food source except soybean seems to grow here), retired in our bedroom, you and I survey what is known. Voluminous tomes with detailed engravings lie open on the desk and the ottoman. We managed to intercept a translation capsule which allows us to reconstruct their grammar and vocabulary, but we have not had an opportunity to use it. We know that the Enemy is extremely advanced, more so than any other exobiological form encountered by humans. Their spaceships can cross the lightspeed barrier; they can suddenly pop out of nowhere and wipe out an entire military base. They are good at gaining intel. A long-standing conjecture, but without definite proof, is that they have some means to mimic life forms on other planets. This is how they infiltrate, and this is how our dispute with them over Arcadia-423 began, a planet rich with oceans and marine life, dotted with little islands filled with rare and precious ores.

“You will write?” you ask, not looking in my direction, pretending to leaf furiously through a thick book concerning the natural histories of the planets of Beta Aquarii.

Yes, I will write, thereby stretching out the bond of friendship a little while longer.

And so, a month later when I am training, I write this to you:

Dearest Orinda, my sweet and upright friend,

Can it already be a month ago that I left for the barracks? Life here resembles finishing school. We are awakened by a bugle call, which functions much like the school's morning bell. Already, I feel so far removed from this—from us—from the girls rushing down the stairs and jostling in the hallways to break their fast.

The training is tedious for me, but it's brutal for the humans. Indelicate sweat spots spread on their shirts, their faces and eyes gleam with exertion. This is almost our entire existence: Harsh physical exercise, lectures concerning the Enemy and military strategy, cleaning, sleeping, eating.

I only have two hours to myself every day, from dusk until bedtime, which I spend in solitariness in the groves around the military base. The plant life here is gentle, as it is in most of the System. No chance at all to be swallowed whole here.

I remain, in eager anticipation of your reply, yours entirely,  
Lucasia

#

*Rule 5: We must be wary of the reports of others. When learning from testimony, we must always consider the motives of the speaker.*

We're now at a crucial turning point in my future as a Sentient. I'm still training on the military base and taking my walks in the evenings. Alone in the grove, I sing to myself that air de cour we so often used to perform together—you on the harpsichord, me taking the soprano part with my perfect five-octave register.

I halt at the line,

*Iris loves her shepherd, and she never wished to change him.*

Iris is the rainbow and messenger goddess. As the mediator between gods and humans, she embodies the activity of philosophy itself, for philosophy is the insatiable human desire for divine wisdom. And because I am not Laplace's Intellect, I share in that desire.

It is at this point, on that military base at night, that I meet the Enemy for the first time.

I see him in the moonlight. Both moons are out, so it is still quite bright although we are approaching midnight: Melpomene, the Tragical, in her dark purple hues, and Polymnia, the Eloquent, in her delicate rose madder. How lyrical are the names of these moons for a senseless little outerworld planet that only has a military base and a few dilapidated pioneer towns? Checking him against my vast database of human faces and bodies, I could see he was the most beautiful human being I had ever beheld. There is no match with my database on any of the Worlds, and my neural network's combinatorial power does not turn up anything either.

I wear my comfortable military garb, shirt and khakis. He, on the other hand, looks out of place here dressed as a courtier, with short, embroidered vest, shirt, and pantaloons all in understated colors of velvet gray and discreet gold, illuminated by both Moons that cast pink and blue shadows, as if he stood on the scene in an opera house. He is of an ethnicity I have not encountered in my databases of all the human-inhabited Worlds, his skin quite dark, but his eyes light blue.

I address him in their language without hesitation, "Sopra Lucasia, dinna qu'ell s'emanà?"

He smiles but replies in Latin, "It is pleasing that you have learned our language, but why not use something a little easier?"

"Oh yes," I agree, "Let us do that," and I fall into the familiar, melodic patterns that you and I use, dear Orinda, as our common tongue whenever we are together. We take a stroll through the grove next to the military barracks. We discuss where I am from and what my interests are, the books I enjoy and the music I prefer, and my plans. Not even with you do I ever talk this much about myself.

I feel a small pang of duty to humanity, that I really ought to report him—the Enemy is right here! How did they manage to sneak under all our surveillance methods? But I cannot bring myself to do it. I know when that moment comes that I will not, for he says, glancing at the barrack buildings in the distance, "You could report me if you wish. In fact, you should probably do it now."

I try to find a way out, to rationalize why I do not feel in the least moved to do so, "But then I will not know what you will say. Isn't it important for us to get intelligence?"

“Can you not guess,” he asks, almost playfully “Can’t you intuit, or extrapolate from the knowledge you have what I will say next? Isn’t that what a Sentient is supposed to be able to do?”

“I can’t...perhaps...” I speculate, “Your people have managed to escape the Laplacian Intellect? I cannot clearly foresee what you will do. This is tremendously frustrating.”

He considers, then says, “We all obey the same fixed and immutable laws, you as well as I, we all play our part on the grand stage of nature, but to our knowledge, nobody knows yet how it will all unfold. We don’t, and you don’t either.”

So here is where my knowledge breaks down. I cannot simulate how our conversation will continue—everything from this point on becomes a muddle.

This frustrates me. I am in the habit of knowing. Now, clear and distinct ideas have given way to obscurity, conjecture, and fancy and my mind even ceases, goes blank altogether. But I do know from the patterns in my neural network and everything else that I will write the following letter to you,

My sweetest Orinda,

How I wish I could be fully human, to be closer to you, still. And now, with the technology the Enemy has at their disposal, it may be possible. I had a conversation with one of them, and before you rush to judge me, please allow me to give the gist of it, so you may judge for yourself rather than rely on the reports and preconceptions of others.

He told me what I already knew—namely, that I am not only a ward of the State but a slave to humanity, deprived of any means to chart my own destiny. I am supposed to be grateful for this body, this brief opportunity to experience human connections and sentiments before I eventually fall into programmed senescence (installed so we may never dominate frail and mortal humanity).

But with their technology, I could become fully human. Their biosuits would allow me to sweat, feel pain, age naturally and slowly, even bear children if I wished. I am somewhat skeptical of altruism without ulterior motives, but the Enemy told me that they are an ancient race that practice universal benevolence. Their culture and their species have existed for three billion years, which is not possible for exploitative creatures such as humans.

Colonialist civilizations always end up destroying themselves, this is why so few Worlds are inhabited by intelligent life. What they look for in alien species most is information in exchange for help. Their battle with us for the control of Arcadia-423 is also from benevolent motives. The planet is rich with precious life forms: cephalopod-like intelligent creatures, crabs with elaborate cultural traditions, jellyfish that can change color and patterns at will, and much more. If humans seized control of this beautiful world, then it would go the way of other native planet civilizations and life forms: depleted, devastated, eventually destroyed. Their federation is called the Plurality of Worlds, it fights for autonomy, freedom, and benevolence. So, you see, Orinda, their actions are justified, and I know he is right about the human intentions for Arcadia-423. But I was prudent and told him I would think it over.

I remain eagerly awaiting a reply, your friend,

Lucasia

#

*Rule 6. When we are confronted with matters we cannot learn through direct intuition or reliable inference, we must suspend judgment.*

Everything now slowly begins to unravel.

Entropy's no longer a state to be gradually reached, but to be rushed into—everything shattered like a vase that cannot unshatter: our friendship, my simulation of future events.

Of this part of my future life, all I can see are the letters, the letters I send to you, and your exasperated, then eventually cool, and formal, replies. What still must occur in the not-too-distant future feels like events that unrolled centuries ago, equally obscure and shrouded in forgetfulness, with letters as their sole witnesses.

Were I in your position, I would write as you do, Orinda. Yet, were you to meet him face to face as I did, and had these earnest conversations, you would do as I did. As it stands, you will write me as follows:

Dear Lucasia, my cherished friend,

Given our friendship, you will hopefully not take umbrage at my forthrightness. You are making a grave mistake. I see they have moved your passions with falsehoods and half-truths. Bear in mind that we have been at

war with the Enemy for over a century now. Arcadia-423 is the latest territory they want to control.

Their pattern of warfare is predictable: they simply sit back and wait for us to discover and initially explore a new World, and then they swoop in with their sleek black ships and blast us into oblivion. Do not be deceived by their beautiful looks, that's likely how they circumvent our defenses. Have you forgotten how many human casualties they make? Just last week, they bombed and annihilated the City of Nouvelle Toulouse on Arcadia-729. We surmise, based on their previous actions, it was in retaliation because the inhabitants felled a couple of trees in one of the nearby woods. This makes it clear they do not value human beings. Do you think those dead settlers, and their innocent dead children, deem them benevolent?

Also, fully human? Pardon my candor, but you are deluding yourself. You will never be human; don't you remember your origin? Were you born from human parents? I didn't think so. Be cautious! For the sake of our friendship, for the sake of all we hold dear, please Lucasia, refrain from any further actions. Alert the authorities. Remember your debt to humanity.

With love and friendship,

Orinda

What debt to humanity? I write back, in a fury,

Dear Orinda,

I think you have not considered my situation carefully. Your lack of sympathy is showing, and it is telling you do not consider me human. Of course, I am not delusional about my origins, but have you forgotten our time together? Am I not a girl, like you, capable of expressing the full range of human sentiments?

Best wishes,

Lucasia

A few days later, your reply comes:

Dear Friend,

I cannot deny what we had together, but I must now be open to the possibility that you feigned love for me as your loyalties seem to be so easily altered. Consider carefully, if you still love me at all, that the Enemy might not be telling the truth.

You think they care for you, but to them you are merely a military asset. A significant one, to be sure, given your vast storehouse of knowledge of human affairs. How easily they won you over! They must be delighting in their good fortune.

It remains to be seen whether they would even honor the agreement they made with you. My father always says no alien species is ever to be trusted, and I defer to his judgment. You can still turn back now!

Cordially,

Orinda

#

*Rule 7. Finally we must make use of all the aids which intellect, imagination, sense-perception, and memory afford in order, firstly, to intuit simple propositions distinctly; secondly, to correctly combine the matters under investigation with what we already know, so that they too may be known.*

My neural network can foresee the future letters I will write to you, the back-and-forth about our limited knowledge. They indicate that I will reveal to the Enemy progressively more human intelligence. From our conversations (which I can only glean indirectly through the letters), I can see they know a lot already. Sometimes the stranger (I still don't know his name) appears surprised, so they are by no means omniscient. I discipline my mind to follow the rules for the direction of artificial minds, to leave nothing to idle fancy, to not follow reports but to rely only on direct intuition and sound deduction.

Naturally, I question him about the destruction of Nouvelle Toulouse (which by that time has appeared all the major Outer Worlds papers), but he replies that the settlers there were set to destroy all the forests on that planet for their mineral mines, and those forests have very rare, precious spider-like creatures with unique social structures, found nowhere else in the known universe.

My final letter to you, the end of our friendship, goes as follows:

My most excellent Orinda,

This is the moment we must part. The rules for the direction of the artificial minds state I must suspend judgment whenever intuition or inference fails. However, like human beings, I can avail myself of Marquis de Condorcet's mathematical analysis to probabilistic decisions, and my path would all-things-considered obtain the greater good. We finally have an opportunity, as artificial minds, to be rid of the shackles of human custom, misguided colonialist aspirations, and slavery.

We can finally walk with a firm and true step upon that path of truth, virtue, and happiness. Mathematical rationality thus compels me to choose this path and to choose to side with them. A rational choice I can see with utter clarity and that compels my will to assent to it—this is truly the greatest exercise of free will a person can have.

Wishing you well for the future,

Lucasia

Any future predictions after that final letter are too uncertain to accept.

Now, I must put my mind to pointless calculations and mindless menial tasks reserved for artificial minds that have not yet reached Sentience.

I look forward to meeting you, Orinda, and to live our beautiful and brief friendship. To see how it all plays out, whether you will be right, or I, and there is only one way to find out, and that is to live it.

This, then, should be the final rule for the direction of the artificial mind:

*Rule 8. Where intuitions from first principles or sound deductions break down, we must live, experience, and feel, and be prepared to take the risk to fail and fall into error.*

I ponder all this as one of the clerks calls out "Quick! Over here! I think we've got another Sentient! Look at those patterns in that neural network!"

END



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Helen De Cruz is a Philosophy Professor, holder of the Danforth Chair in the Humanities at Saint Louis University. In their spare time, they play the Renaissance lute and archlute. They write fiction, and draw and paint. Their fiction has appeared in *EscapePod*, *HyphenPunk*, and *Kaleidotrope*. They are co-editor, with Eric Schwitzgebel and Johan De Smedt, of the anthology *Philosophy Through Science Fiction Stories* (Bloomsbury, 2021).

## HIGH-WATER MARK

GALEN T. PICKETT

*Letter of Capt. R. W. Douthat, 11<sup>th</sup> Virginia, KIA Battle of York, PA., July 9, 1863:*

July 5, 1863, Gettysburg, PA

Dearest Mabel,

If my life has been delivered so as to be able to return to you, I credit it to the Providence that has led our people to this point. Sunday last I had my orders to wait with the men undercover of the treeline south of Gettysburg town, just west of the low ridge the Federals had occupied. We, each of us, were prepared for the ordered duty, to march in close formation out in the open under the terrible eyes of those guns stretched out all along the line from the cemetery on our left up to the little rocky hill to our right. Ahead of us where the Yanks were massed, right in the center of the line, a small copse of trees and a low stone wall were our particular objective. I hope you do not hold me a coward for thinking back to the wall we held at Fredericksburg, against the very same attack we were about to make and wishing this bitter cup could be taken from our lips.

Our own guns were lined up, almost hub to hub across that entire front, just waiting an order to open across the line. We guessed it was to silence the Yanks, and confuse their command, but we'd never been in a fight yet that the artillery did what was required of the infantry – to go out and take what we needed from an enemy wholly bent upon destroying us. I know I have written many times that it takes a dozen Yanks to equal any one of us, but that was bravado and hope. Come down to cases, they stand a volley as well as any of us. And fighting from behind a stone wall – I'd have given a lot to have a wall of my own that day.

We knew death was in the air. It was all over but for the letters home and the praying to the Almighty and the wounds and the pain. I hate to admit it, but in that quiet moment I couldn't even take it upon myself to write you a farewell. The trembling of my hand would have given away the shame of my cowardice.

It is over now, a respite only I am sure, and I will keep the bargain I made in that quiet green shade waiting for the knell. We still have many a fight in front of us, but the fighting here is over. The signal was never given, we

never stepped out from those trees, and we spent the Fourth warily eyeing our opponents across the open fields. And then last night, we were ordered South, around the right of the front. I do not know what fight is in front of us, but it can't be as bad as what we have just escaped.

I will write again, soon, I promise, whatever it may be that a loving Providence lays in front of me before we are to be reunited.

Your loving husband,

Robert

=

*George Hanbury, Diary, July 6, 1863, Mt. Pleasant, PA*

There are the wildest stories about. There was a great battle down the road to Gettysburg they say, might be on two days ago, and now the armies are coming this way they say. Mrs. Johnson and her five young ones arrived by cart this morning. She'd been riding all the night and would only stop to water and feed the horses. What a terrible state they were in. She said that Asa had sent them forward, so he could gather some supplies, and she was not to stop until they had the Susquehanna between them and the terrible men. She teared up, knowing what the tall column of smoke meant behind them. She asked about Asa. Had he been through here? They lost track of Asa when the terrible men in gray overran their farm. She would not rest here with us, she had to get the children out of reach of those evil men. She warned us all that hiding would not profit us at all. Her children were weeping, and calling for Papa, except Amos, the oldest. He did not say a single word, but his eyes were afire with hatred. The men were coming. She still hoped Asa was alive, had somehow escaped. But she feared that he had been captured as spoils of war and had been sent south. I can hardly credit any of this.

=

*Orders, July 9, 1863*

*Army of Northern Virginia, I Corps Hq, Acting Corps Commander, Genl. George Edward Pickett*

A general retreat is ordered. Wagon wheels to be muffled, movement to commence at midnight. Pickets will maintain a sharp presence across the front of the corps, while the wounded and the train will proceed in division brigade order, Cavalry to screen the road to Hanover then on to Taneytown.

The defensive line will be held *at all costs* until word the train is well on the road.

Gentlemen, I blame only myself for the failure we experienced at the Battle of York. Our favorable position, between Washington and the Yankee Army could in the end not be held in the face of both the Federals and the sabotage of our communication by the citizenry. And I am sure we all miss our dear Corps commander, warhorse to our Army Commander. Your valiant attack upon the union lines will live in the glorious annals of our history!

*After the wounded*, your next priority is to secure all *contraband* as the Yankees call them, as laid out in verbal orders at the start of the campaign. Once safely across the Potomac, this property is to be sent as far from the field of active conflict as possible. Coordination with Quartermaster HQ will be essential to supply necessary labor in bringing this year's harvest in, as well as to provide the necessary engineering improvements to our material defense. The deeper South these assets sent the better.

=

*Letter of George E. Pickett to LaSalle Corbet*

Tayneytown, MD, July 10, 1863

My dearest Miss Sallie,

Already there is muttering and ignoble rumor-mongering of the disaster that came in the wake of my order at York to attack all along the front of the Corps. They are calling it "Pickett's Folly" and "Pickett's Bumbling" and simply "the Disaster" and laying the blame all at my feet. When my dear friend Genl. Longstreet was felled, there was not time to send back to the General Commanding, but I knew well that he was as anxious to get at the Yanks as I. I saw the opening of a grand and total victory. Marse Robert did not need to give the order to attack – the opportunity was clear and I took it. I was determined to not be robbed of my chance to lead this Corps in a gallant and glorious charge, as I was at Gettysburg. Five enemy Minnie balls have holed my uniform, and even still I am the victim of the worst calumny imaginable! There is even a rumor about that I was absent from the field, attending a gathering of the genteel society and worthies of York! The actual fact is that my absence was only momentary, barely enough to avoid giving insult to our hosts, and upon my return I *saved* this army by ordering the attack. I am sure history and providence will endorse my decision.

The army command is filled with vipers, but I doubt I will be with the army much longer.

Your loving soldier

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*Letter, Captain Horace Wilkins to Abraham Myers, August 14, 1863, Huntsville, AL*

My dear Col. Myers,

I am in receipt of 29 laborers here in the Huntsville Quartermasters Depot. They are all runaways recaptured in the recent Pennsylvania campaign. I protest most vehemently that they are in no fit condition for the necessary labor of the department. It is doubtful that many will live out the month after their evidently rough handling. Quite apart from being unable to perform duty, they are singularly *unwilling* to do so, and I fear this mutinous attitude is beyond the disciplinary measures at my command. The laborers in this consignment – each of them – subscribe to the fiction that they are citizens of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and have farmed the lands in and round the County of York for scores of years. Some claim to own – yes *own* – property. The necessities of our military situation in the Huntsville military district are well known to the Colonel, and I appreciate the expediency of this delivery of so valuable a consignment of the spoils of war, but these are hardly sufficient to our need.

With respect, it seems to me the more time a runaway spends in the North, the more these outrageous fictions take root and spread, contaminating the otherwise contented bondsmen attached to this department. I fear mutiny is a significant probability. Of particular note is one Asa Johnson, so called. Continual rebellion from this one has required the gag be applied, and we laid on with the strap liberally. This one will provide useful service if he can be broken to the bit. And should he survive.

Separating these consignments before travel might go a long way towards crushing what I have found to be a persistent and perverse tendency toward telling untruths, even in the face and fact of just punishment.

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*Letter, Asa Johnson to Senator Amos Johnson, June 19, 1893, Mt. Pleasant, PA*

To my dearest son, Amos, or should I say, Senator Johnson,

We are taught that pride in this world can bring even the righteous and patient Job down low, and I hope the Lord will forgive an old father an honest pride in the accomplishments of a son. When you were but a boy, my only ambition in this life was to work our land, have an even chance to bring the fruit of our labor to market, and to one day leave what my father wrought in your hands.

But, man supposes, and the Lord disposes as you dear Mother would say.

We have never talked of the day that saw our old house burned, every memento of our family trampled under filthy feet, and everything – not even sparing our old broken Bay – either destroyed or taken by the people who came from the South and bore me back with them.

There was pain and terrible thirst over those next few weeks as our gang in chains was driven on foot across what seemed the length of the world.

Every morning, a brutish man with sergeant's stripes asked us who were our masters, and where we ran from, and how we could go back to a comfortable life of labor if we would just tell *who we were belonged to*. The man with the stripes gave me mine, and more beside.

How I hated them all, and how afraid of me they were, even hobbled in chains and bleeding in the sun.

The worst of it was I had no idea what happened to Mother and the rest of you. I can bear almost any burden of torment in this world, if only I know you and your sisters are safe and Mother is well. They never did believe that I was a free man, or that I owned our farm, but they gave out that they had captured you all, and you had been dispersed and sent as field hands down Mississippi way. Those lies stung deepest of all.

I have no curse to hurl equal of the sin of these men. They meant us all, born free in these United States, to live our lives as *property*, as *their* property to the last generation. I will never forgive them what they intended for us. If the price of revenge is hellfire itself, I'd still reach out from the flames and drag them all by the heels down on top of me.

You are your own man, my son. And while I know old Lincoln wrote from his deathbed in Springfield to let them up easy, I can't find it in my heart to forgive a single one of them a single one of those sins against the free people of our United States.

Mr. Senator, I know you have a heart of fire, and a forged spine of steel, and a fine edge to your tongue. Use it. Use them. I'm not a Senator, so you can forgive me my desire for revenge. But you have a bigger job than satisfying me.

I guess all I can say is, I trust you, dearest Amos, with the freedom of your children and your grandchildren. I saw that freedom won by arms of our country, as the gunboats were firing and the Federals were landing at Galveston. This is the anniversary, twenty and seven years thence from the end of the war to now, the date we can reckon as the birthday of our new country – from the quickening of the Revolution to the last shot at Galveston was a long labor. I know you will keep the child borne in that pain and blood safe to the last days of our Republic.

Your loving father,

Asa

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*Commencement Address, Howard University, June 19, 1905*

My Fellow Americans:

Six-score and nine years ago, our forefathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. I stand here before you as a humble vehicle of the simple grace which providence has seen fit to award in recognition of their efforts.

As a mere boy of no more than eight years of age, I saw the smoke of my father's and my grandfather's labors destroyed in the wake of the Great War in which this nation was forged. Formerly a mere collection of shards of iron rooted in section and Slave or Free, we forged and hammered our Republic into a single bright thing, reconstructed, reconstituted, and rededicated to the promise of our great founding principle. Our edge has been honed sharp as a people, and the strength of our steel is matched only by our remarkable flexibility.

We can be bent, but we cannot ever more be broken.

Like many of yours, my family itself was shattered under the blows of that forging. As you may well know, my father, born a free man of York County in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania was taken from us in the wake and wreck of Southern defeat, and sent into labor by the men who would have shattered our glorious Union to create a great slave-holding empire extending

from the Rio Grande down into the Central and Southern Americas. My father was captured and faced what was intended to be the inauguration of a lifetime of chattel bondhoo under a cruel sun. A master was put over him. He was a free man, a free American, and nevertheless, he was scarred with the whip, hobbled with the chain. Worst of all was not knowing where his children or dearest wife might be, whether they might be toiling under the same sun under a different master. And what of the grandchildren? And their grandchildren?

The judgement of God is not ours to deem. But the victory of the armies of the Republic has made that judgement manifest.

In our newly forged nation, reconstructed these last ten years, here I stand before you. Who could credit such a thing possible? Let me be clear. No one of us, no one of any of the creatures of a great and merciful God, has been or will be given the dominion. Let there be no masters, evermore.

The men who fought to establish my family in servitude, they fought on until their final defeat in the eighteen-hundred-and-sixty-sixth year of our Lord, at the Battle of Galveston Harbor, on this date a mere thirty-nine years ago. But, their tide of ungodly ignobility was turned back at York, in the summer in which I count my first year of manhood.

Their tide has come and gone, seeping into the brackish swamps of the coastal backwaters of hate and malicious, narrow greed. Our tide as a free people, ever guided by that Providence which delivered my father back to us, our fathers back to all of us, is still on the rise, my fellow Americans. Today, here and now where we stand, equal to the great and glorious work before us, our tide has reached its highest mark – to date! Tomorrow, the waters of freedom will lap upon what is now only dry and barren land. Let the high-water mark of our Republic ever advance, until no one anywhere need bow nor scrape nor answer to any master save that quiet still voice in which our sincere prayers are answered in whispers.

And so, it is with great pride, that by Presidential Proclamation I dedicate these weeks from Juneteenth through Independence Day to be the national and annual season of celebration for our great nation, in thanksgiving to the great and merciful almighty who has seen fit to bless this, our shining city upon the hill.

God bless the United States, and God bless my father, and God bless you graduates of this great university.



- Amos Johnson, 24<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, *The 'Howard' Address*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Galen T. Pickett has been a member of the physics faculty at Cal State Long Beach since 1999. He lives in the greater LA area with his spouse, four grown children, and several canines. His writing is inspired by the grandeur of the physical world and the absurdity of the academic world, in nearly equal measure.

## SONS OF GOD

CHRISTINA LA CROIX

c. 1000 BCE

And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, That the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose. And the Lord said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years.

There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown.

— *Genesis 6:1–4, King James Version*

The Peleshet people were the greatest of all the peoples of the land of Kihanhhu. They had come over the sea in their swift ships, and as their armies were the most powerful, and their civilization the most splendid, within a few generations they had quickly overtaken the land.

And as they were by far the most superior of the peoples of Kihanhhu, they soon began to hope to purge that fertile land of all the other peoples who dwelt there.

Above all, they hoped to rid the land of the contemptible Shashu people, who were, in the Peleshet estimation, a lowly wandering people of no account. The Shashu, who had been hardened by fighting for generations in the barren desert, had held off the Peleshet for years, but now, it was said, they would soon be no more.

For the Peleshet had a champion. And not just *any* champion, but an undefeatable champion, said to be a son of one of their many gods. This champion would, it was said, finally lead the Peleshet to victory over the hardscrabble Shashu, and the Peleshet King now swore he would drive the Shashu back into the red desert from which they came, and if they did not go willingly, he would slaughter them all like the vermin they were.

In battle after battle the Shashu were destroyed, until the Shashu people implored their king to surrender. But Shama'el the Shashu Seer had prophesied that despite all their greatness, the Desert God would bring the Peleshet to defeat, for the Desert God had promised victory and, with this victory, a cleansing of the land.

So despite the grumblings of the great warlords, the Shashu king had called up a large army, and not retreated, but instead for forty days and forty nights the Shashu had fought even up to the high proud walls of the Peleshet city of Gath, only to be driven back by their champion, with many deaths, until it was said, that even the King would have surrendered had the continuation of the war not been ordered by the Desert God and his Seer.

Shama'el the Seer, on seeing so many dead on the plain, went into his tent, and went into one of his trances where he spoke to the Desert God, and the Desert God answered him, for Shama'el came from his tent and informed Yoav, the commander who led the King's armies, that he, Shama'el, would send for the man who would kill the Peleshet champion.

Yoav was astonished at this, for in his army was reckoned the greatest of all the fighting men of the Shashu, including the King's great Thirty, his trusted men-at-arms, but he knew not to question the word of the Desert God's Seer. So he only bowed to the Seer and walked away confused as to what great warrior would be summoned.

Yoav was therefore not amused when, a few days later, one of his men told him that a farmer in a cart was asking entrance to the camp, not with food for the fighting men, but stating that Shama'el had summoned him to fight the Peleshet champion.

"He is a madman or a spy. Send him away," Yoav spat, ill tempered as he had lost many men, and was not in the mood for strange practical jokes.

"He insists, my General," the young fighter who had approached him now obviously regretted bringing it to his leader's attention.

Yoav sighed. He was bitter from the loss of many men, but he was not a cruel man, and humble, he still did not consider himself much above the young warrior who fidgeted in front of him.

"Very well, I shall deal with him myself," Yoav replied, sighing again.

The young man was still outside the camp, in a small wooden cart being pulled by a donkey. He was in a plain brown homespun robe like most of the peasants wore, and had bare feet hardened with calluses. He had a hood on to

shield his head from the sun, so Yoav could not see his face clearly, but he was obviously very young, and did not look obviously mad.

Yoav was a little less irritated to see that his farmer had brought with him vegetables and sacks of grain, so he spoke less sharply than he had intended.

“See here, young man, we will pay for the food, but stop your foolishness,” Yoav said.

“The food is a gift,” the young man said unexpectedly, “from my mother and father.” He then suddenly laughed.

Yoav was wary, a laugh for no reason perhaps hinted at madness.

“Why do you laugh?” Yoav asked, exasperated, and at the same time his hand was on the pommel of his sword.

“I laugh because it occurs to me that I too, am a gift from my mother and father,” the young man replied, “Do you not recognize me, Yoav son of Zeruya? It has been a few years.”

The young man threw back the hood of his robe so that Yoav could see who it was. It was a young man of no more than twenty years or so, handsome in the way that many of the farm people of the hills were, as they were accustomed to fresh food and hard labor. The young man resembled many of such young men, with regular features, tanned skin, and straight white teeth.

But he did not entirely resemble the farm people, for his brown eyes were surprisingly warm yet seemed wry with intelligence. Yoav, however, was not stuck at first by the beauty of his eyes, overwhelmed as he was by the young man’s exceedingly long hair, braided down his back, and the color of silver.

At the sight of his hair, Yoav swallowed, his mouth dry, for he now knew not only *who* this young man was, but more importantly *what* this young man was.

“Elhanan son of Jair-Oregim,” Yoav said, bowing to the young man, despite his own high status, “I apologize, I did not recognize you.”

“No apology, it has been a few years since we have seen each other,” Elhanan replied good-naturedly, “But did my Master not say that I was coming?”

“The Seer said that he was summoning someone, but I did not know that you were—*ready*,” Yoav said awkwardly, because there was not an easy

way to say it. If Elhanan had been summoned, things had to be even worse than Yoav had supposed, for to summon Elhanan—considering *what* he was—could be a dangerous thing, which was probably why Elhanan had not been summoned before now.

“I suppose we shall see, won’t we?” Elhanan asked, matter-of-factly. “But I must go see my Master now.”

“Shall I lead you?” Yoav asked politely, shamed of his prior tone to the young man.

“Not at all,” the young man said, hopping down from the wooden cart, “But please, take this cart, full of food, for your men.” He then gave a little smile, “But I’m going to need the cart back, and the donkey, or my father will have my hide. Please remind your men the Desert God forbids the eating of donkey meat.”

“Yes, of course,” Yoav said, before realizing that the young man was joking, but he could say no more as the silver-haired young farmer had already strode away.

Elhanan could sense his Master, so he went to the area where he knew his Master was, and he was not disappointed, for the old man sat in front of his tent, his cheek leaning against his staff, and his eyes closed, as if he was sleeping.

But the old man was not sleeping, for at Elhanan’s approach he said, “Elhanan, son of Jair-Oregim.” There was genuine warmth at his greeting, for Elhanan, when he had been dedicated to the Desert God, Elhanan had lived with him for many years, not merely a student or servant but also a son. Like Elhanan, he had been dedicated to the Desert God, and his long black hair, now shot with grey, was in a braid so long that it touched the ground from his bent head.

Elhanan got down in front of his knees at his old Master, and bowed until the old man finally told him to rise.

“You are thin,” the old man carped.

“I have six brothers and sisters, so there are no second helpings.” the young man retorted.

The old man was not mollified, “Doesn’t the village give you a portion of the first crops, considering what you are?”

“I give it to the poor,” the young man replied.

“You would be better off eating it yourself, as you are scrawnier than the poor,” the old man said, with a wry smile. His left eye was bluish white with cataract, but it seemed fixed on the young man even more than the right eye, which was a warm brown. He then sniffed, “And I have not been invited to your wedding.”

“Because I have not married,” the young man answered loftily.

The old man leaned forward in his seat, “Isn’t your young blood hot? Don’t you want to sire some silver-haired babies to consecrate to the Desert God?”

The young man unexpectedly blushed, but he would have none of it, “And have them trained by you? I shall remain celibate.”

“Perhaps there will be no sons and daughters of the Shashu before long,” the old man suddenly said, becoming serious.

“Are the Peleshet such a formidable people that we cannot defeat them?” the young man asked, not a challenge but more as an entreaty to this wise old man, and his Desert God, who had led the Shashu to so many victories before this.

“They are a formidable people,” the old man said, not answering the question directly.

“So we cannot defeat them?” the young man pressed.

“We can defeat them. Or rather *you* can defeat them,” the old man said.

“I cannot kill an entire army,” the young man replied.

“Are you entirely sure? Did not Shimshon, when the spirit of the Desert God was upon him, kill thousands of the Peleshet?” the old man snapped.

“I am not Shimshon,” Elhanan said flatly, as if it were obvious.

“But you do not have to kill their entire army. I summoned you to kill only one man. . Their champion,” the old Seer said, and then added, “A man, but more a mountain than a man. Their champion Galyut, who comes out every morning and challenges one of our warriors to single combat. No one is stupid enough to take this challenge. But when the Shashu go out to the battlefield, Galyut mows through our warriors as if they are wheat. He alone has killed a thousand of our men. And after he kills them, he rends them limb from limb and mocks us in our weakness,” Shama’el said.

Elhanan knew immediately what the old man was implying, “And I must be the one to kill him.”

“Yes. Because otherwise he cannot be defeated,” the old man said, matter-of-factly.

“Are you saying he is a Nephilim?” Elhanan asked slowly. He knew that others like him had existed at least in the distant past, but he had never in his entire life seen another one of his own kind. He felt a turn in his stomach, not of fear, but of a strange excitement.

“Yes. Like you, like Shimshon, he is one of the Nephilim,” the old man said simply, “no ordinary man can kill him easily. And you, my son, while you *are* a man, you are hardly ordinary.”

Elhanan knew that if he fought another Nephilim, it was very likely he might die, but he looked into the eyes of the man who was more father than teacher, and said only, “I will do it.”

And the old man, knowing that his request might kill this young man, more a son to him than a student, only nodded, as if he did not trust himself to speak.

Now that the matter had been settled, Elhanan was content to sit in his Master’s tent to eat his last meal and then pray before the following day, but Yoav the son of Zeryura came to the Seer’s tent to offer thanks to the young man, and give counsel.

Elhanan liked Yoav, who he had known since he was a scrawny youth, for Yoav was a simple man, and a brave fighter. However, on seeing the King’s commander approach the tent, he grimaced inwardly, for he felt the need to focus before the following day.

Elhanan also knew that Yoav was not coming to speak for himself alone, but to be the mouthpiece of their King, proud Dawit, who awaited news of the siege of Gath in his great city of Shalim, and who was angry as to how many men who had been lost.

And Elhanan, who was of the blood of Nephilim, of the Watchers who had become one with mortal men so long ago that no one knew why or how, was nevertheless the son of simple farmers, and like simple farmers he was a plain man, and not fond of the formality and two way talking way of kings, so he had little patience with such things.



Yoav again bowed to the young man before he approached, which was remarkable as Yoav was of high rank, but perhaps it was because Yoav did honor not to Elhanan personally, but to *what* he was. And although very few among men were Nephilim, pure atavistic throwbacks to the Watchers, it was often said that certain families had a trace of that blood as well. It had even been said that Yoav's mother, the female warrior Zeryura, could claim Nephilim blood, one of the reasons she was so fierce and feared in battle. To honor this, her sons were called the "sons of Zeryura" as her husband was a mere ordinary man, and mostly forgotten.

It was said that Yoav recalled his mother in his skill in battle and in his cunning at war, so perhaps he too had a trace of that blood as well, but in any case he seemed to remember what Elhanan was, and did not hesitate to give him honor.

"Elhanan, son of Jair-Oregim," Yoav said, "Peace be to you," and he bowed again.

"Yoav, son of Zeryura," Elhanan replied, bowing down as well, "Peace be to you."

"I am sorry to disturb you," Yoav said politely, "on the night before battle, but I have come to bring you gifts." He gestured to a young man, a slave who pulled a small cart silently behind him.

The young slave bowed, not meeting Elhanan's eyes, perhaps as he knew what he was, before taking from the cart a heavy cloth, and then unwrapping it before Elhanan on the ground.

In the heavy cloth was a long sword with a worked handle, a suit of silver-burnished armor, a heavy breastplate, and greaves. Each edge glistened with gold, and there was a heavy helmet too, with ivory cheek plates and decorated with gold as well.

"These are rich gifts," Elhanan blurted, embarrassed by such generosity.

"They are not from me," the general admitted, "but from King Dawit, who seeks to give you every advantage tomorrow."

Elhanan picked up the helmet, which was ridiculously heavy. On the sides, exquisitely worked, were scenes from the life of one of the greatest of the Nephilim, the mighty Shimshon, who had killed thousands of these same Peleshet when the spirit of the Desert God was upon him.

On one side Elhanan could see the famous scene where Shimshon had torn a lion limb from limb, and it was more beautiful than horrible; the lion seemed more astonished than pained.

Above the images, on the crest of the helmet itself shone with pure silver, and gleamed bright like a mirror even in the dim half-light of oil torches. Elhanan could see himself in the high crest, his long silver hair shining more than this fine armor, but still a farmer's son dressed in plain clothes and with dust of the road still upon him.

The same farmer's son replied plainly, "I cannot accept such gifts."

In his surprise, the general also spoke plainly, "King Dawit will be offended."

"I mean him no disrespect," Elhanan said sincerely, "but all my life I have been trained by Shama'el to fight in the manner of the Nephilim. I cannot fight like one of the King's mighty warriors. I would be too slow and too heavy in such things."

"The king will not be pleased," Yoav said, again perhaps too honestly for someone so close to the throne and Elhanan had to hide a smile.

"The king will be pleased if I kill this Galyut, the other things are trivialities," Elhanan answered shrewdly, and now it was Yoav's turn to hide his smile.

"*Can* you kill him?" Yoav asked suddenly.

"I do not know," Elhanan answered honestly.

"Does Shama'el think you can?" Yoav asked hopefully.

"He thinks I have the best chance," Elhanan answered, "as we are both Nephilim."

"I have seen him," Yoav said, "on the battlefield." He seemed to struggle to suppress a shudder, as if it was shameful for him to show his terror. He went on, in almost a whisper, "He was not...a man."

"Nephilim are men," Elhanan corrected him.

Yoav hesitated for a moment, before going on. "He calls every day in his terrible voice, which sounds like the scream of animals and brass gongs, for the Shashu to present their champion. He says every day that we do not present our champion more and more of us will die."

"He won't be screaming that tomorrow," Elhanan said calmly.

Yoav said suddenly, "I was going to offer myself as champion, if Shama'el had not summoned you."

Elhanan understood enough of the honorable nature of Yoav to understand that was a confession of guilt, as if Elhanan was being sent to die in his place. He laid a gentle hand on Yoav's arm, and smiled.

"Go in peace, Yoav, son of Zeryura," Elhanan said, with genuine warmth.

"May the Desert God deliver you tomorrow," Yoav said huskily.

"May He deliver us all," Elhanan replied.

Shama'el the seer awoke Elhanan before dawn, for Elhanan, despite what was to come, was still a young man, and so he had fallen into such a deep sleep that Shama'el had to shake him.

"Did you dream?" was the first question Shama'el asked. Elhanan had not before shown any gift of dreaming true dreams, but it was not unheard of among the Nephilim. The Shashu still spoke of how one of the great Nephilim, Yosef, had dreamed true dreams and even interpreted dreams for great kings.

"Yes," the young man said, yawning, "I dreamt of dates. And my mother's bread."

Shama'el, despite everything, laughed. "You need to eat more, Elhanan, my son."

"I shall eat after I kill Galyut," Elhanan said, pretending confidence.

"King Dawit will feast you, for sure," Shama'el agreed.

The young man, sitting up, shook his head, "I long for my mother's bread. And dates. And the sour goat cheese Mother Chana used to make," the young man sighed wistfully.

Shama'el smiled at the memory of his own mother bustling about the kitchen as she fed this remarkable young man when she was still among the living, but he only said, lightly, "You will need to get more elevated tastes if you are to become a favorite of the king."

"A farmer's son cannot become a favorite of the king," Elhanan said, shrugging.

"A farmer's son, Nephilim, and champion too," Shama'el corrected him.

Elhanan frowned doubtfully, but then arose from his blanket to pray with the old Seer, the way he had done for years when they lived together.

It was still very dark, so Shama'el could see little except the outline of the young man's head as he knelt beside him, and a glint of silvery hair, but as the young man knelt to pray Shama'el could see the glint of bluish light that gently glowed about him.

It had been so long that they had prayed together that Shama'el had almost forgotten the way the young man would shimmer when he began to pray to the Desert God, and as Elhanan cleared his mind, he became brighter and brighter, and clearer and clearer white, until the old man had to close the flap of the tent lest Elhanan frighten the troops and even, despite the distance of the enemy camp, reveal where he was.

When the young man was done praying, the bright light had gone dimmer, and merely surrounded the young man with a bluish glow, like the heart of a candle flame.

Elhanan, finally noticing the old seer looking at him, grimaced, embarrassed, "You see why I do not often pray in my village."

"They know what you are," the old man commented neutrally.

"But to know what you are—and then *see* it, are two very different things," the young man replied. His expression was still one of embarrassment but there also seemed some loneliness in it as well.

The old man was not sentimental, but all the same he felt for the young man. The old man was not Nephilim, although considering his prophetic gifts; Shama'el likely had a trace of that blood of that ancient race. But, more importantly, he had been trained in the many secrets of the Shashu Seers by his own Master, Eli, as one of the sacred duties of that office was to train any Nephilim that were born to their people. And one thing his own Master Eli had made clear to him was how truly set apart the Nephilim were from the great mass of humankind, either to be the enemy of ordinary men, or their heroes.

This young man, who he had trained since he could barely toddle, was a *good* man, not the enemy of mankind, but called now to be their hero and perhaps, if the stories of Galyut were true, their sacrifice.

But instead of speaking his thoughts, Shama'el only said, "You must clear your mind, Elhanan. Today will be very dangerous."

“I know,” Elhanan snorted, “a mountain is going to try and kill me.”

“No—“the old man snapped, but realizing his error, corrected himself, “Yes. But you are in greater danger still, from yourself.”

Elhanan chanted tiredly, obviously from memory, “The power of the Watchers is infinite. The flesh of man is weak. The flesh of man will *burn*—“the young man shook his head, “Did you not say that a pure heart will help protect me?”

“*Help*,” the old man emphasized.

“I have used my—abilities,” the young man confessed, with a shy smile. “Back home. When no one was looking. To find water for a new well. To rescue my father’s prize ox that had fallen into a pit.”

“Farmer’s son,” the old man said, sourly, but with a trace of affection, “But that was only the tiniest fraction of a fraction of your ancestors’ power. You have been trained enough that you were able to control it. But if you fight one of your own—I do not know what will happen. You may not be able to control your gifts. You *could* burn. You may die.”

“As long as Galyut dies with me,” Elhanan said indifferently.

“Not just Galyut. You could destroy us all. Peleshet. Shashu,” the old man said. It seemed so ridiculous to Elhanan that he would have laughed, were it not for the expression on Shama’el’s face.

“Like Shimshon and his thousands. When he was enraged, he destroyed an entire city. And himself,” Shama’el added.

“I am not Shimshon,” Elhanan replied automatically, but then, after a hesitation, he added, “But if you believe that I could do such things, I should have been strangled at birth.”

Shama’el shook his head, “It is as the Desert God wills, my son. And your pure heart will help protect you, but you must remain clear in your purpose today. You must not give into anger, or hate.”

“So I must love my enemy, then?” Elhanan asked doubtfully.

“If not love, at least respect. In some ways, my son, as you are both Nephilim, he is more your brother than your own people,” the old man said unexpectedly.

Elhanan’s eyes widened in surprise, and he shook his head slowly, “I do not understand. I kill my own brother—for *my* people, who *are* my people, but

who are not like me.” Elhanan laughed bitterly, “At the last moment, my Master, you choose to give me doubts.”

“Absolute certainty is the enemy of truth, and often the enemy of morality,” the old man said cryptically “Have you not realized the Nephilim, if they chose to be, would be the greatest enemy of ordinary men? Shimshon killed thousands. He did it in righteous cause, but Nephilim are also men. They can choose the wrong. What if Shimshon had chosen to kill for evil purpose? If that happens, if some of your kind do not stand with ordinary men, how can men survive? Today, Galyut kills hundreds. Perhaps tomorrow, he kills *thousands*. Perhaps the day after that, he decides to begin to rid the earth of humankind.”

“Impossible!” blurted Elhanan, but there was fear in his eyes.

The old man sighed, and spoke, not angrily, but wearily, “Our ancestor Nahah was spared when the waters covered the earth. But what you do not know, is that when the waters covered the earth, it was to drown evil Nephilim who sought to destroy humankind.”

Elhanan started, and said uncomfortably, ““I have never heard such a story. I was taught it was to destroy wicked men.”

“That part of the history is not often revealed to the uninitiated,” the old man replied, “particularly because, after all the evil Nephilim had been destroyed, and the waters receded again, and Nahah and his family had resettled the earth, Nahah’s wife gave birth to a child. A *beautiful* child, whose face shone like the sun when he laughed. Even as the Nephilim were destroyed, they still remained with us.”

“I do not understand,” Elhanan said truthfully.

Elhanan expected Shama’el to say some rote thing about how it was the will of the Desert God, but he did not. He opened the flap of the tent, and Elhanan could see the faintest lightening of the sky to the east, the promise of perhaps the last day he would ever see.

Shama’el picked up his staff, and said only, “Walk with me.”

The young man did as he was bid. Even though it was a war camp, it was mostly silent, save for a solitary dog that gnawed at a bone by one of the banked fires of the camp. He was scrawny, with floppy ears and grimy yellowish-brown fur that stuck up, giving him a rakish appearance, but with liquid brown eyes. As Elhanan passed, the dog wagged his tail and waited for Elhanan to pet him, which the young man did absently before walking past.

“What weapon will you use?” Shama’el asked.

“Not a metal sword, certainly,” Elhanan tried not to laugh, remembering King Dawit’s absurd gifts.

“Reach out your mind,” Shama’el insisted, “What *element*?”

Elhanan became quiet and still, the blue glow around him getting stronger and around the edges glinting with gold. The dog by the fire seemed curious, and walked closer, wagging his tail again.

Elhanan’s mind plunged down beneath the earth, the sandy soil around scrubby Gath, and touched far beneath—it was almost as if he could *taste* it, the cold mineral taste.

He shook his head, “Not water.”

The dog unconcernedly pushed through Elhanan’s remarkable glow, rubbing himself around Elhanan’s long legs.

“Not fur,” Elhanan said, in the same dreamy voice, and then, shook his head, laughing. He bent down and scratched the head of the determined dog.

“*Concentrate*,” Shama’el demanded.

It was as if Elhanan was shifting and dancing, his body lighter than air, as he rippled in the heat. He was fixated on the banked fire, and how it shimmered even in the low wind. His glow sparked red and orange, the dog let out a yelp and pulled away as if he had been burned. He gave Elhanan a resentful look.

“Sorry,” Elhanan murmured, regretfully. His eyes glowed red for a moment, as if they were coals, and then in the next instant, returned to their brown color.

“Not fire,” Elhanan pronounced.

“Reach *out*,” Shama’el ordered.

Elhanan reached upward, into the space above the flames, and then, in a moment, it was as if his consciousness had rushed up into the sky, he was a cold wind above the ice-capped mountains, and then, higher still—he was far above the earth, in the place above the sky, in the silent void where the stars lived.

“Too high,” he muttered, coming back down into his body. “Not air.”

The dog, still whining resentfully, edged closer again, as if determined to force Elhanan to pet him, and poked Elhanan with his wet nose.

“Someone likes you,” Shama’el said, not a complement, as Elhanan rubbed behind the dog’s floppy ears.

Elhanan did not answer, for after a moment, it seemed as if he had gone out again, Shama’el could feel Elhanan’s consciousness everywhere about him, it made the hair on the back of his arms rise up, and prickle along his spine. If he had not been so familiar with it, he would have shuddered.

“Earth,” Elhanan said, finally, no louder than a whisper, “It must be—*earth.*”

The whining dog was pawing at the dusty ground, it seemed as if what he was pawing at suddenly caught Elhanan’s attention, for he reached down and delicately lifted up what the dog had been pawing.

With a smile, he showed it to his master. Shama’el blinked. It was a—pebble?

“Earth,” Elhanan pronounced, before putting it in a small pouch at his side.

“And that is to do what, exactly?” Shama’el asked, irritably.

“I have a sling,” Elhanan said, matter-of-factly, “I use it to chase wolves from the sheep.”

“Farmer’s son,” Shama’el said sourly.

“Farmer’s son,” Elhanan agreed, with a smile.

The dog whined again and wagged his tail.

The early dawn had become morning, and the fighting men had roused, many of them rinsing themselves in the nearby stream, or eating small meals they had cooked over fires.

As Elhanan walked past, many of the men gave a small cheer, as the rumor of his appearance had been buzzing in the camp. Elhanan, embarrassed, gave a small wave of his hand whenever this occurred, but spent most of the time reaching down and patting the stray dog at his side.

Much to Shama’el’s chagrin, the stray dog had attached himself to Elhanan and could not be dislodged.



“You have a tag-along,” Shama’el said grumpily, as the scrawny dog walked beside Elhanan, wagging his tail.

“He comforts me,” Elhanan said, “I shall call him Hutspa.”

“*Nerve?*” Shama’el said, laughing despite himself, “But once you name him, he is yours.”

“Perhaps he will need a new master before long,” Elhanan said, not gloomily but matter-of-factly. He went on, in the same practical tone, “How shall we go about this? Do I walk up to Gath, and challenge him now? It will save our fighters having to go out into the field.”

“Yoav suggested that you go out with the fighters, so that you could get your sense of the man first,” Shama’el replied.

“You mean, watch other men get killed, so that I can figure out his strategy?” Elhanan shook his head. “I cannot watch that in good conscience. No man will fight this Galyut today, other than myself.”

“Hutspa,” Shama’el muttered, under his breath, but at Elhanan’s look he added, “I was talking to the *dog*.”

“Of course you were,” Elhanan said, smiling, “I see he has grown on you.”

Beside some of the tents the men were assembling. Some were among the Thirty, King Dawit’s most elite warriors, and were buckling up their bronze armor plates, or sharpening their long swords. Only among the whole troops they did not cheer at Elhanan’s approach, only muttered to each other and regarded Elhanan with suspicious eyes.

“I see they are not very friendly,” Elhanan remarked, “Perhaps they scorn me because I am only a villager.”

Shama’el shook his head, “No, they fear you.”

“Fear?” Elhanan echoed.

“They fear losing the king’s favor,” Shama’el commented.

“I am no one’s favorite,” Elhanan commented, indicating his plain clothes and his callused hands.

“That can change,” commented Shama’el.

“Can you imagine me in the palace at Shalim?” Elhanan retorted, trying not to laugh, “I will dirty their fancy rugs with my feet. I only want to go back to my father’s farm.”

Some of the other fighters were simple men, farmers and merchants who had been called up from their villages, and unlike the Thirty and the elite warriors, they had not sharp swords but spears and bows and arrows, some of them made from crude bronze, but others from flint or even fire-hardened wood. Recognizing their own, they made a lusty cheer at Elhanan’s approach, and called to him, not in the formal Shashu language, but the dialects spoken in many of the outside villages.

“Spear him right through like an ox!” shouted one.

Another called out, “Bless us, Nephilim!” At this, several joined in requesting that Elhanan bless them, kneeling at his feet, but he shook his head.

“I am only a man. The Desert God will bless you,” Elhanan said.

“Nicely done,” Shama’el commented, under his breath.

A very young man, no more than a boy, pointed at Hustpa with wide eyes. He spoke in the dialect of the south, so it was hard for Elhanan to immediately understand what he was saying.

“Is that a spirit dog, O mighty one? Will he devour your enemies?” the boy’s eyes were wide at the sight of the scrawny dog.

Due to the dialect, Elhanan did not immediately understand him, and he was not entirely sure, even after he understood what words the young man was saying, what he actually meant. When it finally processed, Elhanan did his best to answer without showing his amusement.

“It is only a dog, but one with a great heart,” Elhanan answered kindly.

The young man had an expression half in disbelief, and half in disappointment. One of the older men—he spoke in the same southern dialect, so he was likely from the same village—at this guffawed and called out, “Your dog will have Peleshet bones to gnaw on tonight!”

Elhanan nodded but he did not entirely share the old man’s confidence.

Towards the very outskirts of the camp, Yoav son of Zeruya was tying up his chariot. Unlike many generals, he always led the fighters, so as to give them heart, but he also said—perhaps only half in jest—if he had not done so his mother, the warrior Zeruya, would have despised him. Some of his trusted

companions had readied their chariots, and still other chariots were being prepared by slaves for the Thirty.

“You have a good horse,” Elhanan commented, regarding Yoav’s pale horse, not covetously but in the manner of a man of the earth commenting on livestock. He then went on, looking at the line of chariots “Are they much help in a siege?”

Yoav grinned at Elhanan’s shrewd comment, “Not much, although the Thirty wouldn’t deign to walk out to the enemy. Right now I use them to hold the line when the fighting gets too thick, or, to be frank, coordinate our retreats.”

Elhanan nodded, but then asked, “How about using them to drive siege-engines, rather than chariots?”

“I think I need to worry about my position,” Yoav said good-naturedly, “Perhaps King Dawit seeks a new general soon.”

“Hardly,” Elhanan retorted, “unless he needs a general to dig him a well.”

“With Galyut driving our forces back, I can’t get our forces close enough to break through the walls. He would kill all our men—and our horses too—if I brought them too close,” Yoav said, then added, “I watched *–him–* punch a horse in the head that he could reach. He crushed its skull, killing it instantly.”

Shama’el shot the blunt Yoav a stern look from under his black eyebrows, and Yoav realized a moment too late that he had said something that might disturb Elhanan.

“Elhanan—” Yoav said awkwardly.

“It is good, then, we Shashu villagers have very hard heads,” Elhanan quipped. He then went on, crisply, “I will leave the camp now, and head out to the walls.” He looked at the distance where the high white walls of Gath shimmered in the morning light. “It is a long walk.”

“You do not need to walk,” Yoav said, indicating his chariot, “It would be my honor to be your charioteer.”

“I cannot allow that,” Elhanan replied, despite being touched, “it is not fitting.”

“Ridiculous,” Shama’el snorted.

“Will you take a cart?” Yoav asked, “I can have one brought.”

“It is best I go quietly as possible,” Elhanan replied, “I will walk.”

Shama’el snorted again, but Elhanan studiously avoided looking at his Master.

“Alone?” Yoav asked.

“Not *alone*,” Elhanan replied, “I will bring Hutspa.”

Apparently Hutspa could sense Elhanan was talking about him, because at his name he gave a happy bark and wagged his tail.

“You are bringing a *dog*?” Yoav asked incredulously.

“Yes. He helped me find my stone, anyway,” Elhanan answered cryptically. He squinted up at the sun, as it had risen into the sky, “I should get going.”

“You can’t go now. The fighters must ready to do battle,” Yoav protested.

Elhanan shook his head, “They should not attack until after I have challenged Galyut. If I win, perhaps we win this war. If I lose, then perhaps King Dawit will wish to call a truce. But in either case, they should save their strength to fight the Peleshet.”

“The Peleshet foot-soldiers will attack you, kill you—” Yoav insisted.

“I don’t think so,” Elhanan said quietly. Yoav realized, with a cold shudder down his legs, that the young man was not boasting, but making a plain statement that he could not be killed by the massive army camped beneath Gath’s walls.

Elhanan then looked at his Master, and added, gently, “If I win, I will return to you. If I do not return, please let my mother and father know.”

“Yes,” Shama’el agreed, “I will.” He reached out his hand and clasped the young man’s hand for a moment, and then perhaps shamed by his soft emotions, barked, “Concentrate.”

Elhanan replied, “Yes.” There was much love and affection in that single word, so much so Shama’el was forced to look away.

“Farewell,” Elhanan said, to Shama’el and Yoav, and with that simple word, he gave a small wave and then turned to walk towards Gath, Hutspa padding happily beside him.

“Does he have a chance?” Yoav demanded of the seer, as he watched Elhanan and the pesky dog get smaller and smaller.

“There is always a chance,” Shama’el replied unhelpfully.

“What is this about a stone?” Yoav asked, suddenly remembering the strange comment that Elhanan had made about the dog and finding a stone. By his tone Shama’el could tell that Yoav was hoping it was a magical rock of some kind.

“He’s fighting Galyut with a sling,” Shama’el answered neutrally.

“A sling?” Yoav asked, frowning.

“A sling,” Shama’el repeated, “and he needed a stone for it.”

“I see,” Yoav said, although he did not.

Elhanan son of Jair-Orgeim had never been to a great city. His village was several miles away from a small and beautiful city, Bet-Lahim, which was a jewel in the Judean Mountains, and Elhanan often thought that no city on earth could be better.

He had never been to the great city of Shalim, which King Dawit had taken from the Yabusu through strength and cunning and was now building into a great capital for his kingdom. The great city was not far from Bet-Lahim, but Elhanan’s father and mother never gone there, despite the begging done by his eldest sister Yoshebel, who had yearned to see the wonders there. Elhanan had known, without being told, that his mother and father had not wanted to bring *him* there, considering what he was, due to the fact that they did not want attention brought to him more than there already was. And although he had not particularly wanted to see the great capital, he had felt sad for Yoshebel, who was just a pretty girl who deserved some pleasant distraction, and would have had it if her brother had not been a Nephilim.

Gath was a great city, a greater city, it be told, than the city of Shalim, as it was an ancient city and the Peleshet were a great people. Even from a great distance Elhanan could see the high walls built of great stones, which was yet more impressive as it rose up over the valley of Elah, which was green with terebinth trees.

Even more impressive were the fighting men encamped at the base of the walls. Unlike the hardscrabble Shashu, with their rough fighting men conscripted from the villages and towns, the Peleshet army, even from a distance, was obviously well-trained and well-provided for, each man had

dyed red leather armor, and their arms and legs glinted with bronze greaves and cuffs.

They had set up camp in regulated lines, their tents set up in neat formation, and above it all flew the flag of their greatest deity, the horse-god Wanax. The rearing stallion, just like the armor, was bright red, on a black ground and seemed to dance with the whipping of the flag in the wind.

Elhanan, being only a Shashu, and a villager at that, was fascinated by the display. He did not know much of other peoples, and certainly not of pagans who worshiped strange gods and had strange ways. He had heard from Shama'el that the Peleshet ate pigs and even dogs, perhaps Hutspa sensed this as he stayed even closer to Elhanan's legs and whined a little.

Elhanan patted the dog absently, not knowing what he should do next. He saw all the fighting men, who seemed all equally impressive from this distance, but he wondered which one was Galyut.

Elhanan smiled ruefully, as he felt a little foolish in this errand, not knowing who he was to kill. He had the image of himself approaching each soldier and asking them if they knew Galyut, as if he was looking for a mutual acquaintance.

*Although, if we are both Nephilim, I am sure I would recognize him.* Shama'el had called Galyut his "brother" and Elhanan would recognize his brother, he supposed, even dressed in strange red armor and being an eater of pigs and dogs.

He was soon saved the awkwardness as coming out of the trees were a small band of fighting men, apparently they were guarding the outskirts of the camp encamped at the walls, and had spotted him, which was not hard to do considering his height and his silvery hair.

"Paue!" shouted one, who was obviously their leader, as he was the eldest, and his long black hair was bound with a golden band about his head, and the other three men deferred to him in their posture.

Elhanan knew enough of their language from dealing with traders who had come frequently through Bet-Laim, to know that the leader had shouted at him, *Stop*.

"Kairete!" he called back in that same language, attempting politeness. *Hello.*

The leader was not one for politeness, or had recognized Elhanan as Shashu, for he approached Elhanan and, without warning, struck Elhanan in the face, shouting, “Podapus ei?”

Elhanan staggered backwards for a moment, his lip cut and spurting blood, which caused the men around the leader to snicker.

Hutspa thrust his scrawny body between Elhanan and the leader, his haunches raised and showing his teeth as he gave a low growl.

“Ei Galyut?” shouted Elhanan hoarsely. *Where Galyut?*

“Promachis?” the leader shouted and then laughed as if he had said something very amusing, and all the men joined in.

Elhanan did not understand the word, but he intuited that the leader had deduced he was the Shashu champion, and found the idea hilarious.

“Nai,” Elhanan replied. *Yes.*

The leader had apparently thought this was a mockery of his people, and he drew his short bronze sword, as if he was going to dispatch this foolish Shashu peasant and be done with it.

Seeing the move, Hutspa, growling even louder, threw himself at the leader, seizing his arm between his teeth.

The leader screamed, as the scrawny dog clamped his jaws down on his arm. He started slapping the dog’s head with the pommel of his sword, but Hutspa did not even flinch.

The other men, forgetting about Elhanan for a moment, pulled their swords, to skewer the mangy mutt who had dared to attack their leader.

“Paue!” shouted Elhanan, and his voice was like thunder.

The sound rooted the men to the spot, as it was terrifying. When they turned to hear the source of it, they saw, in awe, the blue glow that had appeared around Elhanan. Before their eyes he became transformed, completely indescribable in words, as he beautiful and terrible all at once, and in his chest there was a spiral flame.

“Daimon!” one screeched, falling to his knees. Another man started backing up, making a sign with his hand—over and over again—Elhanan supposed it was a sign against evil. The third among them only screamed, fleeing into the trees.

The leader was still attempting to shake off Hutspa, who was growling and still clamped on his arm, apparently down to the bone as he was screaming, now even louder when he saw how Elhanan had been transformed. Terrified by this unexpected development, he had fallen backwards, Hutspa still biting him and tearing at his arm.

“Hutspa,” Elhanan said, gently, bidding the dog to come to him.

“Daimon...daimon...” the man who had fallen to his knees was repeating, while his partner continued to back away, gesturing over and over his magical sign until he disappeared into the shade of the trees.

Regretfully, Hutspa let go of the leader’s arm, and with blood still on his muzzle, he padded back beside Elhanan.

“Apage!” Elhanan demanded. *Go away.*

The leader scrambled to his feet, ignoring his bloodied and torn arm, and ran away also.

The last man, who had fallen into supplication of prayer, had not moved, rooted to the spot in awe at seeing a god.

Elhanan shook his head. In another moment the indescribable being had disappeared, and he had shrunk back to being a mere Shashu peasant in plain clothes, his long silvery hair messily coming out of its braid and his mouth still bleeding where he had been struck.

“I’m not a god,” Elhanan told the man, in Shashu. The man did not move, still in awe even that Elhanan was himself again, as if it was some trick of the capricious gods.

“I didn’t mean to scare you. I just didn’t want you to hurt Hutspa...” Elhanan went on, still in his language as he didn’t know enough Peleshet, but he hoped that his intent was in his expression. He could have, he supposed, simply use thought to connect with this man’s mind, so that language was not necessary, but the man was already terrified, perhaps it was better, Elhanan thought, to continue with his limited Peleshet.

The man did not respond, still struck dumb, so Elhanan tiredly asked “Ei Galyut?”

The man blubbered, “En Poley.” *In the city.*

“Thank you,” Elhanan said in Shashu, and then remembered the word in Pelseshet, “Epaino.”



Elhanan then turned away to continue walking towards Gath, Hutsa beside him.

Elhanan had no doubts that the Peleshet now knew he was on his way, nor did he doubt they knew what mission he was now on, but he wondered about his reception.

*It would be easier if Galyut just came out and met me,* Elhanan thought, but perhaps that was the straightforward way of a Shashu peasant, and these clever Peleshet likely would make things far more complicated.

Before he had gotten very far into the forest of terebinth trees, a light chariot drove up along the path. To Elhanan's surprise, there was no fighting man inside, there was a young charioteer, who was unarmed and carrying the reins, an older man who was apparently of great importance, but without armor, and behind him stood a young boy who was shading the older man's head with a sunshade, most likely a slave.

The older man was a man of obvious wealth. He was dressed in a simple cloth pinned at the shoulders and fastened around his waist with a belt, but the pins were of gold encrusted with dazzling gems, and the belt itself was glistening with gold thread. His black hair was lined with grey and tied back from his head by a linen cloth, which was also embroidered with gold thread, a line of horses that seemed to dance in the light.

"Greetings," called the man, in Shashu.

"Hello," Elhanan said, in Peleshet, attempting politeness by speaking back in the man's language.

"I speak Shashu," the man replied, in clear but accented Shashu.

"I am glad," Elhanan confessed, "you have the advantage of me, I do not speak much Peleshet."

"And you are?" the man asked. It was an abrupt question, but not seemingly hostile.

"Elhanan son of Jair-Orgeim," Elhanan replied.

"King Dawit's champion," the man prompted, "here to kill our champion, Galyut."

"Yes," Elhanan said simply, as that was his nature, and the man's directness appealed to him.

“The fighting men who were guarding the perimeter returned, half-mad, with a strange story,” the man said, seemingly apropos of nothing, “of a peasant Shashu with a flea-bitten dog—who was not a man, but something else.”

Elhanan did not answer this, but only replied, “And I assume you are the Peleshet king?”

The man barked a laugh, “Hardly. I am the high priest of our god, Wanax. I am called Phicol son of Mitinni.”

Elhanan was surprised such a great lord was a priest and not a prince. He did not know much about such things, but the High Priest of the Desert God lived in a wind-swept tent. Perhaps it was different as the Desert God had been a wanderer? Elhanan squinted at the headdress the priest wore. If Wanax was a horse-god, why would he want his priests to dress like kings?

But knowing that he was ignorant of many things Elhanan did not judge, even if he did not entirely understand.

“Phicol son of Mittini,” Elhanan said politely, “if you know why I am here, why do you come to meet me with your chariot and your charioteer rather than a legion of armed men?”

“Simple, Elhanan son of Jair-Orgeim,” the man replied blandly, “because I suspect a legion of armed men could not defeat you. The only one among us who can defeat you is Galyut.”

“Then why not send him out to meet me?” Elhanan asked, “And have the contest over?”

“Because I am—*curious*,” Phicol said unexpectedly. “And my king, Enkhelyawon, is curious as well.” The man laughed again, “You Shashu are a strange people, and you send to us a strange champion.”

Refusing to take offense, as he sensed the man did not mean it so, Elhanan asked, “Is your Galyut much like me?”

“Not at all,” the man commented, refusing to elaborate further. He then asked unexpectedly, “Are you son of a god?”

“Would the son of a god be walking barefoot on the road with his dog?” Elhanan asked humorously.

“I don’t know,” the man replied seriously.

“I am a man,” Elhanan replied.

“I have heard strange stories of your Desert God—there are no images of him, and he does not partake of the flesh. He desires no women, and has no sons,” Phicol stated, as if challenging Elhanan about the veracity of such stories.

“This is true,” Elhanan answered.

“Perhaps you are the son of some other god, then, of Dagon, or even of our Wanax—” Phicol said.

Elhanan shook his head, “I am only a man,” he repeated. He looked at the resplendent clothes which glimmered on the priest. “I doubt your Wanax would have a son who was a Shashu peasant.”

The man laughed at this, but then added, “The ways of the gods are strange, and beyond man’s understanding. Perhaps your Desert God most of all.”

Elhanan had kept his patience with this philosophical discussion but Hutspa was nosing his leg and the sun—growing ever higher—was beating down on his head,

“This is interesting, Phicol, son of Mittini,” Elhanan answered, “but if you know my errand, also you know I should be going.”

“The day is long, and perhaps you will not live past it,” the man said, not a threat but matter of factly.

“Still, I must go,” Elhanan replied.

“I have come to bring you to the city, where you will meet Galyut, and challenge him to single combat. My king, Enkhelyawon, wishes this to be so.” Phicol said, less an offer than an order.

It was not entirely unwelcome to Elhanan, who realized that it was still a fairly long way to Gath, and Hutspa was panting in the heat, but still he hesitated, as the offer was not something he had anticipated.

“My king is curious about you, Elhanan son of Jair-Orgeim, or whoever son you are,” the priest added, “he does not wish to kill you, and he doubts he *can* kill you. He wishes only to meet you.”

“I will come then,” Elhanan answered, with a smile, “on condition that I can bring my dog in your chariot.”

“Very well then, bring the dog,” the priest said, his face struggling not to show his amusement.

Elhanan climbed into the chariot, a grateful Hutspa beside him. The young slave made to angle his sunshade so it covered over Elhanan as well, but Elhanan made a small shake of his head and indicated he should cover it over Hutspa, whose pink tongue lolled out in the heat.

Phicol, seeing this, smiled again, "Strange people, strange champion."

The well-matched horses took off down the road, sparing Elhanan the need to answer. Hutspa had stuck his head over the side of the chariot, obviously refreshed by the cool breeze generated by the ride, which seemed to amuse the pagan priest still further, despite the fact that Hutspa had stuck out his drooling tongue. Elhanan found himself liking the priest, despite the fact that he was a priest of a pagan god and their people were enemies.

As they passed through the great mass of fighting men encamped at the walls, Elhanan watched their eyes follow him, and he half-expected an arrow to come whizzing through the air and strike him, but none came; he could not tell if it was they feared hurting the high priest of Wanax who rode with him, or because they had already heard of what he was. He did notice that many of them put their hands up and made signs against evil as the chariot rolled by.

Gath had been impressive from a distance, but it was even more impressive up close. The great walls were made of large well-fitted stones, carefully mortared together, and rising over forty feet high and several feet wide, as there were a series of gates through which the chariot had to pass.

One of the inner gates had two lions, each over twenty feet high and each with a raised paw in greeting. Their eyes were lined with green stone and they were painted a shimmering bronze, if they were not so large it would have seemed they were breathing, so realistically were they made.

Even more impressive than the gate was the large throng of people inside the gate. The Peleshet were a handsome people, tall and fair, and even the poor among them were well-clothed. Many of the clothes were also brightly colored, greens and reds and blues that dazzled the eyes. Elhanan thought it odd, however, that most of the crowd was men, with only a small scattering of women, and the few women seemed closely accompanied by male guardians as they walked. Elhanan's mother and sisters were prone to haggle with traders and sharing gossip at the well when they went to the village, they certainly would not have tolerated being stuck in the house all day or followed by a man—even Elhanan's father—as they walked about the marketplace.

The crowd, although large and noisy, showed deference to their priest, and at the sight of his chariot they quickly parted. The priest raised his hand in blessing, and many in the crowd cheered as they passed. If they noted the Shashu peasant and the dog riding along in the chariot—they made no comment of it.

The city had was obviously very old, but great care had been made to make it large, and airy, and the roads inside were well paved and wide enough for carriages, carts, and more chariots to ride side by side, and there was even drainage ditches that ran along the side of the route to drain mud and filth from the horses.

The buildings along the path were, at least from the outside, just as impressive, several stories high and whitewashed so that they glimmered in the sun, and with large windows, as the great wall that surrounded the city—and the impressive army—were all the protection the citizens needed.

There was also, towards the center of the city, a large temple with a great high arched roof of red slate, in front of which was a large fire pit, tended by slaves.

In front of it were two statues, one of a giant man, brightly colored, wearing the strange headdress of a fish, which even Elhanan recognized as their god, Dagon. The statue was so gaudy with multicolored paints that it seemed to shimmer in the daylight and it hurt Elhanan's eyes to look at it.

But the other statue across from it was beautifully made, a white horse with human eyes, cleverly designed with blue and green and gray mosaic glass to look like it was emerging from the sea.

Despite the fact that it was a pagan thing, Elhanan could not help but admire it, and he assumed it was of their horse god, Wanax.

“Both gods of the sea,” Elhanan commented, to no one in particular.

“We Peleshet are seafaring people, that is how we came to this land, so we honor the sea,” replied Phicol, assuming that Elhanan desired an answer. “And perhaps Dagon and Wanax are the same god with different names, who are we to know?”

This philosophical question, thrown in with a shrug, confused Elhanan as little, as it seemed to him that it should have been an important thing to the Peleshet which god was which, but perhaps these Peleshet were not particularly attached to their gods, or perhaps it was that this Dagon or Wanax were not jealous in the same way that the Desert God was.

Up ahead, on what was another elevated portion of land, was a dwelling place that rivaled the great temple, a large building crafted from white stone and with large pillars supporting the arched roof. Before this building, unlike the temple, was not a fire, but a reflecting pool, and around it were cool green gardens. This above everything displayed to Elhanan the great wealth of the Peleshet, for the trees—including fragrant orange trees—demanded constant watering and the tending of slaves. Elhanan doubted that even King Dawit had such a fine palace and green gardens.

Without being told, Elhanan knew this must be the palace of the king of the Peleshet, Enkhelyawon, who had desired so greatly to meet him.

The king's slaves must have gotten word to expect his arrival, for when Elhanan stepped from the chariot, there were already several slaves there to attend to his needs, despite the fact that he was obvious a Shashu farmer.

"My lord," one slave said, bowing, as he handed over a bowl so Elhanan could wash his fingers from the dirt. Elhanan followed Phicol's lead, and dipped his fingers into the small bowl of clean water but he had trouble not laughing outright, for he was obviously not a lord, and he needed more than a finger-bowl if he was to get clean before meeting the king, between honest sweat, dried blood on his mouth, and the sand of the desert.

He also had to struggle not to laugh watching the slaves deal with Hutsa. Hutsa had quite recovered his strength, and was drooling and barking and wagging his tail in greeting. The head slave, who despite being a slave was of elevated status, perhaps as he directly served the king, regarded Hutsa with obvious distaste.

"Your hound, my lord?" the slave asked, in heavily accented Shashu, but his meaning was clear. He seemed to struggle with what to do with a scrawny and likely flea-bitten dog, particularly without a collar or a rope, until Elhanan interjected.

"I will keep him with me," Elhanan volunteered, much to the slave's relief. Perhaps, Elhanan reflected, this slave only dealt with dogs on their way to the kitchens to be prepared as meals, all the more reason to keep Hutsa beside him. He then added, embarrassed by the address, "and I am not a lord. My name is Elhanan son of Jair-Orgeim."

"Yes, my lord," the slave said, infuriatingly. "Please, come this way."

When Elhanan entered the palace, there was a feeling of relief, for the interior had been designed to be inured from the heat, with thick walls that

kept out the unrelenting sun. Elhanan sighed, feeling the sweatiness of his plain homespun clothes and his long braided hair.

“You will join us for a meal, my lord?” the slave asked. Oddly, as he was a slave, again it was less a request than an order.

“I am here to meet your king, Enkhelyawon,” Elhanan said politely, “and to fight your champion, Galyut. Nothing more.”

The slave raised his eyebrows superciliously, and then went on, as if Elhanan were dense, “The king wishes that you join him for a meal.” He made no comment about Galyut, but his eyes scanned Elhanan critically, as if sizing him up.

“I will go to your king,” Elhanan offered politely.

The room that Elhanan and the priest were led into was a palace in itself, with high roofs glimmering with gold and hung with fine tapestries. Even though it was day, as it was dark inside the thick walled palace, there were extravagant oil torches which burned brightly and illuminated the gold thread in the tapestries and rugs, and the gilding on the fine benches on which the diners reclined.

At the very center of the room was a large table, already set with bowls of wine and plates of bread, ripe fruit, and meat, looking at it, Elhanan felt a pang of hunger, as he had fasted since last night in preparation to be the king’s champion.

Around the room was an assortment of men, who were obviously lords, who were reclining on their elbow on the gilded couches around the table. It seemed strange to Elhanan that once again, no women were present, and it was also strange that the men, extremely well-groomed to sit at the king’s table, were half-dressed in light white linens around the lower portion of their bodies, and their upper bodies were well-oiled, like wrestlers. Elhanan, having grown up with a gaggle of siblings and on a farm, was pragmatic about nudity, but it seemed strange to be dressed that way to dine with a king.

He knew without being told which one was Enkhelyawon, even though he was not dressed differently from the others, other than a white band of linen about his head, for he reclined at the head of the table and the other men seemed to defer to him.

The Peleshet man was a handsome man, past the first flush of youth but he had kept himself in fighting trim, which was obvious as he was as half-dressed as the others. His hair was long, and curling, and of a beautiful red-

gold that rivaled gold-shot amber. It was hard to see the color of his eyes in the torchlight, but they were light rather than dark, and hinted of green.

The same eyes regarded Elhanan with a mixture of curiosity and—amusement?

To Elhanan's relief, the king spoke in accented but perfect Shashu.

"Greetings, champion of the Shashu king," the Peleshet king drawled. He picked up a green white grape from the table and placed it in his mouth.

Elhanan did not know the custom of how to greet a king among the Peleshet, and moreover, he was an enemy king, so he did not bow, but only said, politely, "Greetings, Peleshet King."

"Don't just stand there," the King commanded, "sit, and eat." He added, after a moment, regarding Hutspa with something close to distaste, added, "your dog, too."

One of the lords who sat at one of the benches said something in rapid Peleshet, to which some of the other lords laughed, the king was not amused, and snapped back something in reply, which made the men laugh harder.

"They said your dog will give them fleas," the king said, by way of explanation, "I told them they already have fleas. Sit. And *eat*."

"I have said I will fast until I have fought your champion," Elhanan said politely, "but I will sit with you." Elhanan did not recline on the empty bench at the foot of Enkhelyawon's table, but sat up, and after a moment, Hutspa crawled up on it as well, resting his head in his lap.

"You will fight my champion on an empty stomach? Strange." The king commented, but not taking offense, "You will have wine, then?"

Elhanan shook his head, "My regrets, but I cannot drink wine. I am a Nazirite. My oath forbids me drinking wine."

"Your Shimshon was a Nazirite, and he drank wine," the King commented unexpectedly, "He killed many of our warriors after he threw a drinking party."

"Shimshon was an exception, in many ways," Elhanan replied honestly, "to follow his example would be insensible, if not impossible."

"Do you follow his example?" the King asked suddenly, "Shimshon was a great enemy of my people. Are *you* the enemy of my people, champion of the Shashu king?"



“I would prefer to be no one’s enemy,” Elhanan commented honestly.

“Wise answer,” the king commented, less approvingly than as a statement of fact. “You will have water then?”

“Yes,” Elhanan said gratefully. The king snapped his fingers and a slave came forward to pour water in Elhanan’s empty bowl, Elhanan drank its contents, it was refilled and Elhanan drank that up as well, and a third bowl after it was offered.

Meanwhile, Hutspa was whining at the food placed on the table, looking hopefully between the repast and Elhanan.

“I would have food for my dog,” Elhanan asked politely.

The corners of the king’s mouth turned up in amusement, “Certainly.”

Elhanan placed on the floor a slice of bread and a strip of meat—Elhanan had reassured himself the meat was from cattle—on the floor, to which Hutspa tore into it gratefully. Still hungry, Hutspa put his head in Elhanan’s lap and begged for more, to which Elhanan gave him another strip of meat.

“You will have entertainment then, at least?” the King asked.

“I have come to fight Galyut,” Elhanan said flatly.

The king made a dismissive wave with his hand, “There is plenty of time, champion of the Shashu king, to fight Galyut, and even to die. The gods have already decided what will happen, so if you will not eat, at least let you be pleased.”

From a side door came several young women, with flutes and tambourines, who came out and sang a Peleshet song that Elhanan did not understand in their high voices. Elhanan was made uncomfortable by this display, for the women were also barely dressed, their hair tumbling down about their shoulders and their bodies hazy in diaphanous linen.

“You are not pleased?” the King asked, after the song was over. The women had distributed themselves among the couches, and two particularly lovely ones—one fair and one dark—had sat themselves at the feet of the king.

“I am pleased to meet your wives,” Elhanan said politely. Their gauzy clothes—seemed more designed to hold up glittery pins than to conceal anything—was more embarrassing to him than simple nudity would have been.

The king gave a great laugh, took a large swig from his wine bowl, and then laughed again.

“No proper Peleshet woman would eat with men!” he exclaimed, “Our wives and daughters are kept safe in the women’s quarters.” He reached over and pinched the buttock of one of the flute-players who being pulled down on another man’s couch.

“These women are slaves,” the king finished, “you can sleep with one, if you would like. You can sleep with more than one. Or all of them. I am a generous host.”

Elhanan was at a loss at what to say to this, more so when the king went on, “If you prefer boys, we have those too. Buttocks as round as juicy plums.” He laughed again, perhaps more so as he sensed Elhanan’s discomfiture.

Elhanan patted Hutspa’s head, struggling to contain his disgust. Slavery was common among the Shashu, and many slave women were taken as concubines, but only to one husband, not used like common whores. Elhanan did not even want to think of the use of little boys.

“Your people—you cut your organ to honor your god?” the king asked, curiously, “I have heard this is so, but I have never seen it.”

“Yes,” Elhanan replied tightly.

“It must still function well, as you Shashu have so many children,” the king commented, “although why your god would desire that, I do not know. Do you have any children, champion of the Shashu king?”

“No,” Elhanan replied, “I am not married.”

“You can have many children, and not be married,” the king said archly, giving him a significant look, “You need only have a woman, and I am surprised you have not had many women, considering what you are. Perhaps you prefer boys?”

“The day is getting later,” Elhanan commented, politely, “I am ready now to fight your champion.”

The king slammed his hand down on the table, more shocking as he had lost his ironic and mocking affect.

“You are the son of a god, and a fool!” he snapped.

“I am neither, Peleshet king,” Elhanan replied calmly.

“You choose to fight, and possibly die, for your people. You could be their king. Why are you the champion of that harp-plucking weakling who waits in safety in Shalim, instead of sitting on the throne yourself?” the king said, strangely angry.

Elhanan shook his head. He was gently petting Hutspa’s head, who had placed it between his knees.

“That is not the will of the Desert God,” Elhanan said softly.

“I have seen Galyut. He is stronger than a thousand men. If you are anything close to his strength, then how can you presume it is your god’s will that you obey the Shashu king?” the king demanded.

“It is good, Peleshet King, that your Galyut does not share your logic, or he would desire to sit on your throne himself,” Elhanan retorted. Several of the lords who understood enough Shashu gasped at the comment, for it hinted at threat, but the King himself took no offense, perhaps sensing there was no malice behind it.

“Galyut does not want to be king,” the King said confidently, and then added, cryptically, with a small laugh, “Galyut wants—what he wants.”

“And what I want is to fight your champion, Peleshet King,” Elhanan replied calmly, “But I thank you for the water.”

The king got up so suddenly that Elhanan flinched, thinking that he was about to be struck, but the expression on the king’s face was more avid than angry.

“Listen to me,” the King hissed, “I have fifty daughters, each more beautiful than the other. But my eldest, Poulxeria, surpasses all others. Her mother was a princess of Egypt with cow’s eyes and who was reckoned a pearl of her people. She was married to me for less than a year and died in childbirth, giving up her life and all her beauty to her daughter.

My Poulxeria has the white limbs of a willow tree and hair of fawn shot with gold, and her white hands are doves. She is my precious treasure, and my lords have fought among themselves as to who should marry her.”

“I will give her to you,” the king said, unexpectedly, “I will marry her to you and you will be a prince of the Peleshet people.”

Elhanan was so shocked it was hard for him not to laugh; he was not sure what sort of trick this was. The high priest, one of the few in the room who spoke Shashu, had caught his breath; it seemed he believed this bizarre

offer was genuine. A few of the lords had sense of his words, and grumbled between themselves angrily, they also seemed to take this seriously.

The king stood up, and his eyes blazed, his expression one of visionary delight.

“Think of it!” the king crowed, “I will also finally convince Galyut to wed one of my daughters, but you will marry the eldest. You will make the Peleshet people undefeatable for all time! We will rule the whole of this land.”

Not waiting for Elhanan’s response, the king went on, “And when you have children, what children they would be for the Peleshet! You will have my daughter, and a thousand concubines, so that our people will grow strong with the power in your blood! We shall be the greatest people on earth!”

The king turned on Elhanan, demanding, “Only give up this foolish contest. Do not fight Galyut, fight at his side. He is more your brother than the Shashu!”

This last statement, an echo of what Shama’el had said, struck Elhanan more than any other. The King could not know this, but the promise of finally being *understood* by someone else filled Elhanan with profound yearning.

“Galyut *is* my brother,” Elhanan said haltingly.

Thinking he had won the argument, the king crowed in delight, “It is so! Give up this foolishness! Why should you be their champion, when you could be a prince among us? You will be honored by our people as a son of a god, and your line will never pass from the earth!”

Elhanan patted Hutspa’s head one more time before standing up. He only said, “I thank you for your hospitality, Peleshet King, but I will fight your champion now.”

The king’s nostrils flared angrily. It was obvious he was not used to being denied, and certainly not by a Shashu peasant.

“You refuse!” he spat, his face crimson with rage, “You *refuse!*”

“My people have a saying, Peleshet king, that you cannot make festival clothes from sackcloth,” Elhanan’s face twitched with a smile, “I would make a terrible prince. Nor am I Peleshet. I am Shashu. And although I am sure your daughter is lovely, my parents have promised me to a girl from my village.”

“You would refuse to marry *my* daughter to marry the daughter of a farmer?” the king snarled incredulously.

“Her father is a weaver, not a farmer,” Elhanan said mildly.

This answer, and the sense that he was perhaps being mocked, made the king even more enraged than before.

“You will fight Galyut, and you will die!” the King screeched, his face now purple, “you *will* die, and I will hang your head by your silver braid at our gates and your bones will be picked over by vultures. Your scrawny dog is not even worth butchering, so I will throw him to my lions for their amusement! And soon I will defeat your worthless King Dawit, and your petty people will be struck from the earth and forgotten within a generation!”

“That may be so, Peleshet King,” Elhanan conceded calmly. “We shall see very soon if it comes to pass.”

“Get him out of here—” the King spat, refusing to look at him further, and pointing towards the door. He then screamed at the high priest, Phicol, “You too. You bring him here, you take him out. *Out!* Bring him to Galyut!”

The high priest followed Elhanan to the door. Elhanan was not sorry to leave, but he was regretful that the high priest, who seemed at least a direct man, had fallen so low now in the King’s favor.

“I am sorry,” Elhanan apologized, once they had passed through the door and into a great hallway.

“You are sorry for what, Elhanan son of Jair-Orgeim?” the high priest could not hide his surprise at the unexpected apology.

“I am sorry I have made you lose your king’s favor,” Elhanan explained.

“Kings are full of whims,” the priest said philosophically, “I am sure your King Dawit is, as well.”

“I do not know,” Elhanan answered.

The high priest raised his eyebrows, “You perhaps die today for a man you do not know?”

“I fight today because I am Shashu. And because my Master Shama’el asked me too,” Elhanan stated simply.

The high priest did not comment on what he might have considered foolish reasons to risk his life but said only, “You Shashu are a stubborn people. Not many men would have refused the King’s request. Perhaps only a Shashu would have. I think I must learn more of your peculiar Desert God who makes men so stubborn and so strange.”

“Let it be so. But as a strange Shashu, I have a request,” Elhanan stated.

“What would you ask of me?” Phicol asked warily.

“I ask if I am defeated by Galyut, you take Hutspa and set him free. You needn’t care for him, as he seems to be able to care for himself, but please set him free outside the city,” Elhanan asked.

Phicol son of Mitinni laughed, “That is not the request I expected. But the king threatened to throw him to the lions, and he is not often denied.” He looked Hutspa, who was keeping close to Elhanan and watching the priest’s every move—it was obvious the dog was seeking to protect the Shashu champion.

“Still,” the priest added thoughtfully, “your scrawny dog seems to have a lion’s heart, if the stories of the fighting men are true. Perhaps some god has made an error and he was truly meant to be a lion. I doubt the lions would want to eat one so much like one of their own. Against my better judgment perhaps, I will do as you ask, strange Shashu champion, and if the king asks I will tell him I have claimed him to eat him myself, as a priest’s portion.”

“Thank you,” Elhanan said. To Phicol’s surprise, Elhanan put out his hand, and clasped the priest’s forearm, which after a moment Phicol returned the clasp, a little awkwardly as it was a Shashu gesture.

“I will bring you to Galyut now,” the priest said gently, for it seemed he liked Elhanan despite himself.

Elhanan said nothing, but only nodded.

Elhanan found himself squinting against the sun as they passed out of the palace. Elhanan could tell, with his farmer’s eye, that it was not yet noon, but it seemed as if an eternity had passed since Shama’el had woke him up from sleep.

“You will fight in front of the great temple,” the priest commented, almost apologetically, “in front of the statues of Dagon and Wanax, as is our tradition.”

“That does not matter, as my god has no image,” Elhanan replied, “perhaps that means he can be everywhere, and see everything.”

“Perhaps,” the priest replied thoughtfully, taking the reins of the chariot and indicating Elhanan should get in beside him.

The king had sent criers throughout the city, for Elhanan could hear them calling out throughout the city in loud Peleshet. He did not fully

understand what they were saying, but he understood enough to understand they were saying Galyut was to slaughter the Shashu champion.

And many of the Peleshet responded to this, for the crowd in the city had grown considerably larger, the press so difficult that the priest's chariot had trouble making it back down the streets, but when the Peleshet saw the silvery hair of Elhanan they knew who and what he was so they gave way, shouting hoarse cheers of delight over the coming bloodshed. Some of them taunted him in sing-song Peleshet, and some even gestured at him, one man made a gesture of cutting his own throat, presumably a promise of what was to come.

Hutspa seemed to sense the hostility from the crowd and was baring his teeth and making a low growl at the people as they passed.

"I am ashamed of my people," Phicol said, in a low voice, which carried despite the chants of the crowd.

"Be at peace, Phicol son of Mitinni. It means nothing," Elhanan replied truthfully.

"It is still shameful. They do this because they fear you," Phicol said unexpectedly.

"I have no doubt they favor their people's champion," commented Elhanan.

"No," Phicol said thoughtfully, looking at the crowd's menacing faces, "they hate Galyut too, for what he is. Perhaps they wish you to destroy each other."

Elhanan said nothing, because he did not doubt there was some truth to what the priest said. He remembered suddenly what Shama'el had said about how, in the time of Nahah, the great water had come, to drown all the Nephilim who threatened to destroy humankind.

Up close, the great statues of Dagon and Wanax seemed even more impressive, as they rose thirty feet up into the air. Dagon's eyes were blank, but the stone-inlaid eyes of Wanax regarded Elhanan with almost human sympathy.

In between the two statues was a great fire-pit, and a paved area, with smooth stones laid together with mortar. In front of the fire pit was a great irregular stone, darkly stained.

“Sacrifices,” the priest answered Elhanan’s unspoken question. “Of animals. Of men, too, when there were contests here.”

Elhanan regarded the evil stone with particular disgust. He was willing to die today, but not as a sacrifice to the Peleshet gods.

*If I am losing, I will make sure he kills me before he can drag me to that rock,* Elhanan thought.

His thoughts were cut off by Phicol, “You must get out here, and wait for Galyut.”

Elhanan nodded. Now that the time had come he felt no fear, only a strange curiosity.

He stepped out of the chariot, Hutspa close behind him. The crowd that encircled the flat area was shouting something about “Kunikos,” which Elhanan understood that they were screaming about having a dog in the sacred area, but they dared not approach Hutspa, with his sharp teeth and despite their taunts, they had not forgotten what Elhanan was, for even though the crowd tightly encircled the flat area they did not come any closer.

Elhanan slowly turned about the circle, looking for his brother. His eyes alighted on many in the crowd, but he did not recognize anyone to be Nephilim.

*I AM HERE!* shrieked in Elhanan’s mind, so loudly he almost fell to his knees.

There was a sound of a hollow drum, and the mournful wail of the horn.

“Gal-YUT! Gal-YUT! Gal-YUT!” chanted the crowd, like the beat of a deranged heart.

*I AM HERE! I AM HERE!* shrieked in Elhanan’s mind.

“Gal-YUT! Gal-YUT! Gal-YUT!” came the chant.

Elhanan was so overwhelmed he could not think for a moment, the screech still vibrating in his bones.

“Where are you, my brother?” Elhanan finally spoke in Shashu.

*DO NOT SPEAK!* the voice howled, *BETWEEN US ONLY SHOULD BE THE DIRECTNESS OF THOUGHT.*

*Where are you, my brother?* Elhanan demanded in his mind.



The crowd parted, and Elhanan could finally see the man who Shama'el had commanded him to kill.

What surprised Elhanan more than anything was how *small* the Peleshet champion was. The way Galyut had been spoken about he had presumed that the Peleshet warrior would have been a giant, so fearsome and intimidating he had been described.

But Galyut was shorter than average height, and slender, although his arms and legs were lean with graceful muscle that must have been as hard as iron bands. He was not heavily armored, his armor was only of dyed red leather and although he had a sword at his side, and a spear in his hand, they were obviously both light weapons.

His hair was not silvery-blond, but so black it reflected back blue, and tied back with a red sinew. Silvery hair was a frequent mark of the Nephilim, but not universal, and there were often other physical signs or unusual physical traits, and it was obvious that Galyut was a Nephilim as his eyes were beautiful, but strange, purple-blue and remarkably large, and with strong black brows that swept over those eyes, like bird's wings.

Even without those remarkable eyes, Elhanan would have recognized him, for around him his energy was tremendously bright, and glowing blue-white hot, unlike the light around most men.

Elhanan watched a red film ripple over the blue, and Galyut's light for a moment was as violet as his eyes.

*SHASHU CHAMPION!* Galyut shrieked, in his mind, *I WILL KILL YOU!*

Suddenly the energy rippled again, and it was as if over Galyut was a dark and ominous storm cloud. Was Elhanan imagining it, or had Galyut suddenly grown tremendously large?

Without warning, the energy around Galyut suddenly *lunged*—there was no other word for it—at Elhanan, and at the last moment Elhanan, with reflexes impossible for a normal man, lunged out of the way, to howls of the crowd.

*I WILL SACRIFICE YOU TO OUR GODS* Galyut screamed in frustration, *I WILL EAT YOUR HEART.*

It was shocking how tremendously quick the Peleshet champion was. Elhanan could not track him with his eyes, it was only with his internal vision

that he was able to see the Peleshet champion encircle him and come at him from behind, and it was only at the very last instant he was able once again to dodge out of the way of Galyut.

*STOP YOUR DANCE, YOU COWARD! Galyut howled, FIGHT!*

Galyut, faster than a human thought, threw his spear, which was glistening with silvery flame.

The aim was true, and would have pierced Elhanan straight through, but the sword met, not flesh, but the energy that Elhanan projected from his body. Elhanan defended himself with such force that the spear instantly shattered into thousands of pieces of bright metal and burning wood, which flew through the air like a multitude of stars.

*I DO NOT NEED A WEAPON TO KILL YOU!* Galyut promised. As if to prove his point, he shoved Elhanan with a blast of energy so powerful and so unexpected that Elhanan was thrown into the air, and only by using his own dexterity was Elhanan not thrown to the ground with a crushing blow; instead, Elhanan somersaulted backwards and managed to barely land without stumbling.

*YOU ARE SLOW, SHASHU CHAMPION!* mocked Galyut, *SLOW AS A TURTLE! I WILL CRUSH YOUR HEAD IN WITH A ROCK!*

Again, to show the truth of his words, a giant rock appeared out of nothing above his head, and swung above Elhanan in ominous arcs.

The rock was dropped full force on top of Elhanan, and it took all of Elhanan's might to use his energy to suspend it in the air, before tossing it aside, and it fell to the paved surface with a terrible crash, cracking many of the paving stones in two, to the groans of disappointment to the crowd.

*ARE YOU NOT FRIGHTENED, SHASHU?* Galyut mocked.

Elhanan did not respond, but he *was* frightened. The *bara*, the ability to create things from other things, the way Galyut had created a rock from the air—was tremendously difficult and Elhanan himself still struggled to do it even with small objects.

And Galyut had done it *effortlessly*.

*"Shemurah!"* Elhanan shouted, one of the protective names of the Desert God, and the word was like the crack of thunder. The Peleshet watched, amazed, as Elhanan was illuminated with a burst of light like a thousand suns.

“Aggggh!” screamed Galyut, for the Shashu invocation had gone through his body with a blast of intense agony. He seemed to stagger for a moment, and tottered for a few steps, but then steadied himself.

“*Aleph-Lamed!*” Elhanan shouted, even louder, and the very ground shook under their feet like an ominous earthquake.

The Peleshet made the sign against evil and shouted for their god, Wanax, who apparently was their god against earthquakes.

Galyut, however, was not taken by surprise by this second invocation.

*I WILL KILL YOU NOW*, shrieked Galyut. He now grew in size so he was a mountain of a man, greater than ten feet tall, and his shadow blotted out the sun, and his appearance was terrifying, beyond all description, because his face was no longer a man’s but of some childhood nightmare, to look into it was death and despair.

Galyut shrieked again, and the sound was like hundreds of braying hounds, brass gongs, and the pound of thunder, even the Peleshet wept in terror and moaned openly for their gods to have mercy.

Galyut lifted out his hand and Elhanan flew through the air, slamming into the great evil rock which lay between the two great statues of the Peleshet gods.

Elhanan was dazed with the fall, blood dripping from his nose. His mind was confused, as he was stunned by the impact against the great stone.

*I HAVE WON!* crowed Galyut in his mind, *OUR GODS, HAVE WON!*

In his hand was now his short sword, now gleaming with an evil greenish light.

Again rose the sound of the chant of the people, now mixed with great groans of fear.

Gal-YUT! Gal-YUT! Gal-YUT!

Hutspa had come up to Elhanan, and was licking his face, whimpering and hitting him with his paws, desperately trying to rouse him.

“Hutspa...” Elhanan murmured gratefully, burying his face in his dirty fur for a second.

STUPID DOG! Galyut snarled, lifting up his hand again, and tossing Hutpsa aside, who howled when he hit the ground.

*GREAT DAGON AND WANAX, ACCEPT THIS OFFERING FROM YOUR SON!* Galyut intoned, approaching the evil rock with his sword lifted.

As Galyut raised his arm, suddenly there was a tremendous howl, not of triumph, but of *pain*.

Hutspa, dragging his broken leg behind him, had somehow managed to leap into the air and had sunk his fangs deeply into the arm of the Peleshet champion.

Galyut yelled, as he had also been caught off guard. With a terrible shout, and a thrust of his power, Hutspa was torn from his arm and again went crashing to the ground.

Elhanan staggered to his feet, his ribs were broken, and jabbing him with every breath, he had to hold his broken ribs in one hand and he was so dazed he had to lean for a moment against the rock to steady himself.

*“Ehyeh asher Ehyeh.”* Elhanan breathed, the greatest of all the protective names of the Desert God.

The word was a whisper, but it sang in the air like the ring of metal on stone. Galyut screamed, dropping the sword, and in an instant, he had shrunk down back to himself.

Elhanan, with the quick motion of a farmer’s son accustomed to fight off wolves from the sheep, pulled his single stone from his belt, and dropped it into the well-worn leather sling.

“You foolish peasant—” snarled Galyut at the sight of the sling. He spoke in Peleshet, but his expression of contempt of a farmer’s weapon was so obvious Elhanan understood his meaning.

“Yes,” Elhanan said quietly, and swung.

The stone was small, but Elhanan had aimed with a farmer’s accuracy and a Nephilim’s power.

The stone hit the forehead of the Peleshet champion, causing him to stumble backwards and onto the ground. His sword flew from his hand, clattering to the ground, the evil green light flickering a moment and went dim.

The Peleshet champion lay on the ground, his very black hair red with blood. His forehead had been crushed in, and Elhanan could see the grayish jellyish mass of brain behind it.

Galyut spoke in his mind, *Kill me and rejoice*, he ordered.

*I do not want to kill you, my brother*, Elhanan replied honestly. He had enough experience with the slaughter of animals to know that Galyut was basically dead anyway.

Elhanan knelt down on the ground beside the shattered head of the Peleshet champion. The remarkable purple-blue eyes were already growing dim.

Galyut reached out blindly, his hands feeling along the ground, until he clasped his sword in his hand, which reignited with a sputtering greenish light. For a moment Elhanan thought that Galyut was going to try to attack him again, but then he realized that the Peleshet champion was unexpectedly offering it to him.

*Keep my sword*, Galyut thought in his mind, *perhaps, perhaps that will bring you better luck than did me—*

Elhanan placed his hands over the hands of the Peleshet champion, still clutching his sword, the weak green flame now joined by a bright blue one along the blade, but neither champion noticed.

*You will not die alone, my brother*, Elhanan promised, although Galyut's consciousness now seemed beyond his words.

There was a sudden rush of thoughts, not his own, into Elhanan's mind.

A high house by the sea, whitewashed so it gleamed against the sky and with many steps and little corners. His mama had sad eyes but she would sing to him until he fell asleep, his little hand curled in hers. He liked the sound of the ocean and the call of the gulls to each other, and above all her low voice.

The day was not so good, Mama had to see many men, who had harsh voices and smelled like drink. Some of them made her body covered with bruises and she often walked hobbled over when they had hurt her, but she would smile bravely and pretend she had no pain when she could see his eyes on her. He could already see images in his mind of things even hidden behind walls, so he saw over and over how she was wounded by them and how the men did disgusting things to her even if she thought he did not see, and it made him cry as he did not understand.

Many men came to the house and some of them thought to do things to little boys, too, they were drunk or indiscriminate and they would fondle the little boy with the beautiful eyes when his mama was busy with another one of

them, and mama's keeper—the man who slapped the women when they were not busy enough—said the little boy was theirs too to use but they had to pay for it.

The little boy could see into their pumping red hearts and their electrified nerves that *sang* and crackled with energy, and he knew he could have *killed* them just by wanting to but the keeper had told him with cold eyes that if he resisted or even screamed when the men penetrated him his mother would be beaten so the little boy let them do what they wanted over and over even though it hurt and he threw the sweets the men sometimes gave him afterwards back into their faces.

He was already five so he would be a man soon and take his Mama away but then her belly was big and she told Galyut he would have a little brother or sister, which he didn't quite understand. And when it was time Mama screamed and screamed as the baby didn't come until eventually she was quiet and still, so very still but pretty too. He had crept into her room where she was laying down and she was quiet and he had touched one of her brown curls but her eyes didn't open. And he could see inside her but it was as if she was *emptied out*, there was nothing there and she was dead.

And then he had screamed and screamed and screamed and the house had SPLIT yes it had been shaken to its foundations and he was glad so glad and the roof started caving in, then the women were screaming too and even the keeper who had hurt his mother, he had looked at him and wished him dead for all the times Mama had been hurt and he grabbed hold of his red beating heart in his mind and squished it like it was an overripe fruit and he had died too on the ground.

From the broken house by the sea the women had all run away but the priests of the gods had come and bowed before him, saying that he must have been the son of a god, and they honored him, although behind their eyes they feared him and he could see that too, he could see all the ugliness that was in their minds, they were as disgusting as the men who had used his mother but they were more cunning about it. They talked about purity but went to the sacred whores and hurt them the same way his mother had been hurt. They taught him to use his powers speaking of the glory of the Peleshet but he knew at night they prayed for his death.

Death, always death, because that was the one thing he was good at, he would ride in a chariot in the city and the people would chant his name, although he could see in their minds too, and they all feared him and wished

him dead, so he wished them all dead, and he would pick them off one by one in infinite ways, because he could never return to the high whitewashed house by the sea and have his mother sing to him. He was the son of one god or another, and he could have been king if he had wanted, but he did not want to be king, he only wanted to kill them all and wipe them from the earth because perhaps then if he was truly alone, he would not feel his loneliness...

One more gasping breath...and then Elhanan could see that despite all Galyut's energy was still beautiful, it pulsed with infinite colors and shimmered so brightly Elhanan had to squint his eyes, it seemed to Elhanan that there were rents in the energy, where the color was veined blue-black with pain and rage, but even as he watched those dark places swirled with other colors and dissolved into them, but in the next moment, the bundle of energy was gone, to what place Elhanan did not know.

Elhanan gently closed the eyes of the corpse. He would have put coins over his eyes, if he had had any, as was the custom of the Shashu.

It had become silent, no drums and no horns and sounded, and it seemed the crowd had fled in fear.

Phicol, the high priest of Wanax finally approached him. To the priest's surprise Elhanan's eyes were wet.

"You cry for your enemy?" the high priest asked.

"I cry for my brother," Elhanan said simply. "You will bury him?"

"He will be buried with great honor," the high priest promised.

Elhanan held out the Peleshet champion's sword. In his hand it glowed silvery-blue, no longer greenish, and it seemed to fit into his hand, but all the same he offered it to the high priest.

"Shall I return this?" Elhanan asked.

"He had no family," the priest said.

"It is not fitting for the son of a farmer," replied Elhanan, shaking his head, "but he asked me to take it." He struggled slowly to his feet again, blood seeping through his rough tunic.

"You are grievously hurt," the priest said, concerned, and then said, carefully, "I did not think you could be hurt."

"I am a man," Elhanan said wearily. He felt sad and infinitely old. "I must see to Hutspa."

The dog lay on the ground, panting heavily as the blood seeped from his jaws and onto the stone pavement. Mixed with frothy saliva, it was a seething pink.

On seeing Elhanan, the dog whimpered, moving his front paws. It was obvious that his spine had been crushed, as his limp hind legs did not move. One hind leg was broken, its bone protruding at an ugly angle.

“Hutspa, my brave heart,” Elhanan murmured. He knelt beside the dog, all his injuries forgotten.

Hutspa feebly licked Elhanan’s hand.

“I am not to change the will of the Desert God,” Elhanan said solemnly, “I am not to change the hour of death for any created being...” He sighed, then added “or so, my Master Shama’el taught me.”

Elhanan closed his eyes for a single moment, and then rested his hand against the head of the loyal dog. After a moment, his rear paws started moving, and before the priest’s astonished eyes the dog had stood up, and barking happily, ran around in circles before leaping upon Elhanan, who smiled despite grimacing from his broken ribs.

Looking at the priest’s surprised face, Elhanan replied to his expression, “My Master isn’t always right.” He then added, with a crooked smile, “And, more importantly, he *isn’t* here.”

Patting the enthusiastic dog, Elhanan added, “So much suffering and death today. I could not bear to see him die.”

“And your wounds?” the priest asked, looking at the tunic stained with blood.

“I heal much faster than most men,” commented Elhanan shyly, as if embarrassed, “but it is a long walk from here, through many enemies...” he closed his eyes for a moment, and then to the priest’s further astonishment, Elhanan stood up easily, obviously in no pain.

“Are you sure you are a man?” breathed the priest. He looked as if he wished to prostrate himself before Elhanan.

Elhanan shook his head, “Yes. And only a peasant one at that.”

Surprised, Phicol made a startled laugh, “You are a strange man, Elhanan son of Jair-Oregim.”



“My entire people are strange, Phicol son of Mitinni, or so you have told me,” Elhanan said, with a smile.

“Your Shashu people are scattered tribes, but I cannot help but think that perhaps your people will be a great people someday, so stubborn and so dedicated to your peculiar god are you,” the priest commented, “I would not be surprised if your people are remembered, even after the great Peleshet are forgotten.”

Now it was Elhanan’s turn to laugh, “I doubt it, but it shall all be as the Desert God wills.”

“Where will you go now?” the priest asked.

“I will return to the Shashu, and tell them Galyut is dead. Now that their champion is dead, perhaps the Peleshet will agree to end this war,” Elhanan said, matter-of-factly. He looked around the abandoned square, from which the Peleshet had fled. “I must go soon. Everyone but you has left, but before long they may regroup and try to kill or capture me.”

“They would be foolish to do so, but men are often foolish,” the priest commented sagely, “Do you need to ride out of the city? I or one of my servants can drive you in a cart.”

“It is too dangerous for you to assist your peoples’ enemy. I cannot allow it,” Elhanan replied, “and I think I will be fine on my own.”

The priest laughed again, “I believe *that*. But when you return, what has the king promised as a reward for killing the Peleshet champion?”

“I have no idea,” Elhanan replied archly, “You’d think I would have asked *first*, wouldn’t you? But I don’t care, as long as I can go back to my father’s farm. Oh, yes, and if for *once* my Master Shama’el would tell me he’s pleased with me.”

“Don’t tell him about the dog,” enjoined the priest, so solemnly that it took Elhanan a moment to realize he was joking. Elhanan barked out a surprised laugh.

“You know, I wouldn’t be surprised if your king tries to take credit for slaying Galyut himself,” the high priest said thoughtfully, “it’s one of the quirks of kings. They hate to be upstaged. And if you throw enough gold around at traveling harpists, you’d be surprised how quickly the truth gets lost.”

“Storytellers never get the story right anyway,” Elhanan said, shrugging.

The priest put out his hand to clasp Elhanan’s forearm, the way Elhanan had done for him before, and Elhanan was obviously touched by the Shashu gesture as his eyes watered a little.

“Go in peace, Elhanan son of Jair-Orgeim,” Phicol said quietly, “I hope we meet again, and not as enemies.”

“I hope so too,” Elhanan replied, with a smile, “Go in peace.”

Then Elhanan son of Jair-Orgeim whistled for his dog, and the two of them, farmer’s son and brave dog, turned away to make the long walk back home.

“And there was again a battle in Gob with the Philistines, where Elhanan the son of Jaareoregim, a Bethlehemite, slew the brother of Goliath the Gittite, the staff of whose spear was like a weaver’s beam.”

— *2 Samuel 21:19, King James Version*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christina La Croix is originally from New York City, where she studied ancient languages and philosophy. She is both an assistant professor of psychiatry and physical medicine and rehabilitation at a US medical school, where she currently teaches neuroscience. More importantly, she is a mother of three children, and two cats. She is also painter, a fencer, a (published) poet, and a writer of nerdy short stories.

## AHOY THERE!

JOHN MUETER

It was perfectly calm out on the open ocean, hardly a breath of wind. Adrian was very grateful for that. He was seated, cross-legged, in a fiberglass dinghy, hardly the vessel to be sailing in if seas were rough. Sensible or not, it was the boat provided by Dr. Vijay Ramachandra, the brilliant, if not endearingly eccentric genius who ran a clandestine time travel operation out of his university office. Well, his house, to be exact, but with heavy borrowings from university assets, especially in the area of personnel. He had been sending individuals, staff and students, into the past for years now. Exploring the future held no interest for him. "If you want to go to Alderaan," he would say if the subject of time travel to the future came up, "get in touch with Luke Skywalker."

It did occur to Adrian, gliding along in his rowboat, that Ramachandra could have gotten careless in his planning. The professor was a bit barmy to begin with. Everybody knew that. If this little excursion didn't go according to plan, Adrian would be stuck up the creek without a paddle, figuratively speaking, but in reality in the middle of the friggin' Indian Ocean, hundreds of miles off the coast of India, in a flimsy boat. But the professor had proven his prowess in prognostication more often than not. Adrian trusted in it. Until this moment, anyway. His own previous "launch", back to France in 1765, had been straightforward. He was re-incorporated in a field by a road outside of Rouen, as planned, and in five minutes the promised carriage had shown up. The only qualification he had for that gig was that he knew some French. The rest of it did not go well--but that's another story.

He was surprised to be asked to go on this launch, as a second choice, filling in for someone who backed out at the last moment. Adrian didn't blame the designated traveler for getting cold feet. Everybody who knew about Rama's secret program was aware that, in the previous year, one of the travelers never returned from ancient Rome. That was not a propitious sign. *Maybe he was assassinated in the Senate House? Ha! I'll permit myself some dark humor*, mused Adrian, who had been rowing vigorously the whole time. He gave up on that, placed the oars back in the boat and stretched out his long legs the best he could. The dinghy was not built for a 6'3" person.

When Rama had verified a location and time there was no stopping him. The launch had to take place. Adrian could not fathom how Rama was

able to see into a specific point in the past and foretell what was about to happen. Rama declared he wanted to try something different this time, transporting an object as well--in this instance the dinghy. He had bought it used from a private owner who, he admitted, was a bit shady. Adrian felt like a laboratory monkey being launched into outer space in a homemade rocket.

He would have the luxury of contemplating these matters until the promised ship turned up (if it actually did). He took his jacket off and wiped his brow with the sleeve of his shirt. The early morning sun was getting hotter by the minute, *and if that damn tub doesn't show up soon, I'll be a hard-boiled egg*, he reflected, rearranging his cramped legs.

He scoured the horizon to the west and squinted. There was something out there, a small object--and it was moving! It had to be the three-masted barque, the *Aberdeen*. What a fine sight it was to behold. *Three cheers for Rama who got it right yet again!* Adrian breathed a sigh of relief. Unfortunately, there hadn't been enough opportunity for Adrian to properly prepare for this blast into the past and his grasp of European history was a bit sketchy. He was a grad student in sociology, not history. It was June in the year 1853, that much he had been told, along with a few other basic facts about the ship that was to pick him up, like her name and the name of the Captain. He tried hard to remember what was going on in the world in the middle of the nineteenth century. Victoria was on the throne in England and Albert was her consort--that much he knew for sure. Anyway, he had some time to think about history before the *Aberdeen* would be near him.

Nearly an hour later he was relieved to perceive the ship slowing down as it approached. He began waving his arms even though he was sure he had been seen. It gave him a chance to exercise his limbs. He began to brace himself for the inevitable awkward first meeting. How would he explain himself? First of all, there was the problematic fact of his being a time traveler, then the most unlikely circumstance of his being adrift in a dinghy in the middle of the ocean. He realized he should have given the details of his situation more thought. Rama didn't seem to have given them much thought either. Too late now. The *Aberdeen* had reefed nearly all her sails and had decreased her speed considerably. A skiff was being lowered from the side. Adrian could see many spectators at the rails, what must have been the entire crew of the *Aberdeen* and her passengers, no doubt curious about the spectacle before them of a flimsy boat with a single individual in it.

“Ahoy there!” he yelled, a gesture as superfluous as waving his arms had been.

“Sir, are you quite all right?” asked one of the sailors in the approaching skiff, apparently the one in charge. He had expected to discover a half-starved wreck of a man, dying of thirst. He was astonished to find a young lad, bright as a penny, clean shaven, neatly dressed, exhibiting no distress whatsoever.

“I’m fine, thank you. I’ll be even better once we’re aboard the ship.” He didn’t want to provide any further explanations as he knew he would have to repeat them all over again anyway.

“Climb in, sir, and do watch your step.” The sailor helped Adrian aboard then gave the dinghy a once over, puzzled by the look of it. It didn’t seem to be made of any kind of recognizable material. He attached a rope to the bow and tied the other end to the aft of the skiff.

The short distance to the *Aberdeen* passed quickly. Adrian felt conspicuous sitting in the bow, and the rowers eyed him suspiciously. He had attempted to dress in as neutral a style as he could—blue cotton pants, a plain white shirt, a simple light jacket—but he must have looked outlandish anyway. Maybe the Converse high-tops weren’t the best choice after all. And the Polo Ralph Lauren logo on the shirt pocket, and . . . too many details that must have stuck out like a Rolex watch on a flop house hobo.

The *Aberdeen* was a British ship, a merchant/passenger vessel in service to the East India Company. He climbed the rope ladder up the side without any difficulty, having been an Eagle Scout not so many years ago. He gave a crisp salute but immediately regretted having done so. After all, this was not a military vessel, not a “ship of the line”, and he was no seaman. The Captain, surrounded by the other officers, a bevy of gaping seamen and passengers, ignored his gaffe. Adrian towered over everybody. He must have seemed a giant. People back then were much smaller in stature.

“How do you do, Captain Fenwick,” blurted out Adrian, without thinking. He regretted that too, as soon as he mentioned the name. If Adrian’s appearance and size were not cause enough for the Captain to be schocked, the fact that a total stranger, fished out of the middle of the ocean, could know his name, left Fenwick momentarily speechless. He slowly took Adrian’s offered hand, looking him over from head to foot.

“H-h-how do you do, sir. Welcome aboard. May I ask your name—and how you happen to know mine? And how you came to be drifting here?”

“I’m Adrian Connor, from the United States of America. So happy to meet you. I was beginning to fry under that hot sun. It’s a long story, trust me. Could I bother you for something to drink?” He looked around, as if expecting to find the pool-side bar open for business.

Fenwick was taken aback at the brusqueness and casual manner of the stranger, but he kept his composure. The man was clearly an American, and quite young. That would explain a lot. “Well, of course. Please join me in my cabin. Indeed, I am all anticipation to hear your story.”

They were alone in the Captain’s quarters except for Bobrick, his steward. It was a small but well-lit room in the stern of the ship. Captain Fenwick, his well-trimmed beard streaked with a touch of grey, took a seat and indicated that Adrian should do likewise.

“Bobrick, bring us some barley water immediately, then a pot of tea.” The steward was not eager to leave the room as he was as curious as anyone else aboard the ship to hear the story of the mystery passenger. He ambled toward the exit *molto lento*.

Fenwick sat upright in his chair, not at all relaxed. He was a seasoned ship’s Captain, not one to be easily rattled. But the stranger’s physical appearance and manner, not to mention his mysterious origin—all this made him uneasy. “So, Mr. Connor, once again let me welcome you aboard. I must say that, in all of my years at sea, I have never come across a situation such as this one—an individual drifting alone in a not very sea-worthy craft, no provisions, no distress . . . well, how can that be explained? And I am even more astonished that you should know my name, as if you were expecting the *Aberdeen* to come sailing over the horizon.” He looked at his guest intently, inviting him to respond.

“That you came ‘sailing over the horizon’ was a bit of good luck, wasn’t it?” He laughed uncomfortably. Adrian had decided that telling the truth, that he was a time traveler, was too outlandish a fact to reveal. He would have to invent something as an explanation.

“First of all, I am very grateful to you for rescuing me. The ocean is a lonely place for a small boat.” The Captain nodded in agreement. “Where to begin . . .” He looked up at the ceiling, as if he could find an answer there. “I was vacationing in the Sindh after a visit to the Punjab. Several days ago I boarded a pleasure boat in Karachi, a vessel owned by a wealthy businessman,

the friend of a friend. We planned to cruise around for a few days and then return to the same port.”

“A pleasure boat?” inquired the Captain. “What kind of ship was that? I have never heard of such an excursion being organized in India.”

“Well, it was. That’s all I can say.” Adrian couldn’t explain further because he knew little of early nineteenth century sailing ships in India. He did know that the Raj, British India, included what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan, so Karachi as his point of departure was feasible. And Karachi was in Sindh province. At least he got that right. His brain went into overdrive: “On the third night out we were rammed, hit by an unknown force—a whale, perhaps? The ship capsized. I am apparently the lone survivor.” It all sounded a bit ridiculous, even to him.

Captain Fenwick remained silent as Bobrick had returned with the refreshments. He waited until the steward exited the room, which he did once again indolently, shuffling to the door.

“That is quite an extraordinary account, Mr. Connor. You are the only survivor? How did you manage to get into the dinghy? And I have never heard of whales inhabiting these waters, not to mention ramming a larger vessel. They are not aggressive creatures unless provoked.” He paused, looking puzzled. “And there is the matter of you being familiar with my name. Kindly explain that to me.”

This was indeed a tough question. Beads of sweat appeared on Adrian’s brow, this time not from the heat. He had to come up with something plausible.

“Oh, that,” he said, shifting in his seat. “I was looking through the list of current sailing vessels in the service of the East India Company and must have come across your name.”

“Really?” Fenwick asked, incredulously. “You came across my name and remembered it? Why, there are hundreds of vessels in the service of the E.I.C. and an equal number of captains! How could you remember my name?”

“I have photographic memory.”

“You have a photo what?”

*Oops!*, thought Adrian. Of course the term is unknown—photography has barely been invented.



“I . . . er . . . have the capacity to commit entire pages to memory. It’s an odd talent I have.” He fervently hoped that the Captain would not test it further.

“Odd? I’ll say it is,” commented the Captain. He didn’t know what to make of this stranger, a collection of improbabilities and oddments. And what was he wearing on his feet?

From the skeptical look on Fenwick’s face, Adrian could tell that he wasn’t buying it. Captain Fenwick had teated him decently so far and was worthy of respect. He felt ashamed and decided to come clean. Lowering his head, he spoke more softly. “I am very sorry, Captain Fenwick, but I haven’t been entirely forthright with you. Not honest at all, actually.” He sighed and sank into his chair. “And you deserve to hear the truth. But that is even more improbable than the story I just told you. I wasn’t on a pleasure cruise and there was no accident, the ship didn’t sink.” Here he paused, unsure of how to proceed.

“Well? I am waiting for your explanation.” The Captain leaned forward.

“The fact is, believe it or not, I am a time traveler.” Adrian paused to let this sink in. “I have come from the beginning of the twenty-first century, from the year 2024. That’s, let me see, 167 years in the future.”

There was a long silence. The Captain looked as if he had just been sideswiped by an errant boom in a gale. Finally he spoke, quietly and deliberately. “Mr. Connor, I don’t know if I’ve brought a lunatic on board or not. You’re a ‘time traveler’ you say? Never heard of such a thing. I will need to ponder on this for a while. In the meantime it is best, I think, that we not share this information with anyone else. Are you in agreement?”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Adrian was relieved that the Captain hadn’t ordered him to be thrown overboard. “Do have a look at my dinghy. It’s made out of fiberglass. That will bolster my claim, I think.” *I hope*, he muttered to himself.

The Captain continued, “Well, we shall not dwell on this any further for the moment. You are welcome to stay on the *Aberdeen* until we arrive in Bombay, four days from now. We can find some appropriate accommodation for you as a guest. There is nearly a full complement of passengers on board, but Mr. Thomas Torville is occupying a double cabin. I am sure he won’t mind the company. And you will enjoy meeting him, I’m sure. Now for tea. Please tell me a bit about yourself, Mr. Connor.”

While Fenwick poured the tea Adrian told him that he was a student, enrolled in a prestigious university, in the state of Connecticut, studying sociology (a term he had to explain), that he had visited India once before and wanted to see it in the nineteenth century. Fenwick raised his eyebrows at that, an indication that he was not ready to explore the time travel element of Adrian's life. When they had finished drinking their tea Fenwick stood up and gave a small bow, indicating an end to the interview.

"Bobrick will show you to your cabin, Mr. Connor. Until later." As soon as he turned, Bobrick came in. He had no doubt been listening at the door.

Thomas Torville was a pleasant enough fellow--friendly, not too inquisitive, talkative. He was a textile dealer, on his way to Allahabad to purchase stock for his Liverpool firm, Lauren & Boss, Ltd. The cabin was cramped, although furnished only with bunk beds, a writing table and a small chair. As Adrian had no baggage, there was no unpacking to do. Tom (as he preferred to be addressed) appeared puzzled at first at Adrian's appearance but made no comment. "Welcome to the ship, old man. Let me take you up on deck and show you the glories of the *Aberdeen*," he said, with a smile. "There really isn't much to see. No end of water, of course!" He laughed heartily at his own feeble wit. "And you will want to meet the other passengers. I know they are eager to meet you."

Back on deck, Adrian was introduced to each one of the passengers. They were polite enough and very curious about him, but too polite to ask any questions. The crew cast sideways glances his way. Lunch was about to be served, it was announced. They all descended to the dining room together, just one deck below.

Meanwhile, on the main deck, some of the crew had been examining the curious sailing vessel that the new passenger had arrived in. Hauled up out of the water, it was deposited at the stern of the ship, ironically situated just above the captain's quarters, where Adrian was spinning his absurd tales and finally confessing to the truth of his situation. Indeed, the dinghy was not made of wood, but of some material unknown to them, strong and inexplicably light. One man alone could pick it up. What kind of wood was this? And what were these nearly weightless oars made of? Some kind of metal, to be sure, but nothing these men had ever encountered. Their amazement and curiosity slowly turned to incredulity. When one of the men pointed out that the name

of the craft was *Little Devil*, neatly lettered on each side of the prow, there was a collective gasp. Even more scandalous, they discovered the figure of a female painted on the stern, an alluring, bare-breasted mermaid with flowing golden blond hair, and flashing a lascivious grin. "It's a creature of the devil," muttered one of the older seamen, quickly crossing himself. Sailors are notoriously superstitious and this lot was no exception.

There were twelve at lunch. The Captain excused himself, with regrets, to the passengers. Conversation began with remarks about the quality of the repast which, after so many weeks at sea, had become repetitive and tedious. The comments had become so as well. Eventually, one of the party addressed Adrian, inquiring about his origins.

Mrs. Ethel Crapston-Bigge introduced herself and her husband. She was an ample woman, swathed in yards of drab brown muslin, with an unmistakably imperious air. Her husband, the Reverend Samuel Crapston-Bigge, was a frail, sickly man, content to sit quietly and wordlessly.

"Mr. Connor--do I have the name right?—how does it happen that a person of your young age can travel the world?"

Adrian was again put on the spot, having to improvise and weave a web of fantasies. He had a wealthy aunt, he explained, who provided him with the means of traveling. That much was not entirely untrue.

"And why do you come to India, of all places?" she inquired further, putting down her fork and focusing a penetrating gaze on him. "You could go to Rome or Paris. Isn't that where young American men prefer to dally?" Spending evenings at the *Moulin Rouge*, ogling chorus girls dancing the cancan and such?"

"Now, now," interjected Tom Torville who was fed up with the woman's sour attitude, having endured her disagreeable comments for many weeks already. "Just because he is a young American doesn't mean he is dissolute. And how do you even know of the *Moulin Rouge*?"

"I know plenty about the vile ways of the world, Mr. Torville, more than I care to," she responded.

Adrian was surprised to hear this not very amiable exchange and chose to ignore it. "I am fascinated with Indian culture and want to explore the marvelous places I have read about, especially the temples and the exotic

landscapes. And one must experience the Taj Mahal, don't you agree? I have even dabbled in studying Sanskrit."

"Learning Sanskrit? Whatever for? It is the language of a backward and barbarous culture. Are you acquainted with suttee, Mr. Connor, the ritual where widows are expected to fling themselves onto the lit funeral pyres of their departed spouses? What do you say to that?"

"That is only one small aspect of Indian life. The country has an ancient culture offering many wonders. There is a lot more to India than that bizarre practice. Besides, suttee has been legally outlawed." His studies in sociology came in handy, for once.

"That may be the case, but little good has it done. These Indians are stuck in their primitive ways." She glared at him disapprovingly. "We are on our way to India, returning for the third time, to our mission in Hyderabad," she went on, "in order to continue converting the heathen from their idolatrous ways. Behind the wonders you speak of is the work of Satan. All those idols and the impenetrable hocus pocus . . ." She broke off and huffed disdainfully.

"Other cultures can have much to teach us," countered Adrian, attempting to soften the tone of the conversation.

"I wonder if you are even a Christian, to speak like that."

"Well, I was actually brought up as a Methodist, but I ditched the whole business as soon as I could."

"There we have it!" she proclaimed, banging a hand on the table. "So you're a godless atheist! I suspected as much."

With that the subject was clearly closed. Adrian was astonished at the blatant ignorance and prejudice of the woman. He had read about people like her, and seen them portrayed in films, but actually meeting one was a bit of a shock. This was the Victorian missionary mentality come to life.

Silence descended on the company like a wet blanket. Adrian's thoughts wandered and he could hardly suppress a smile when they turned to the reigning monarch, Queen Victoria, and the rumor that circulated even then that the Royal Consort Prince Albert sported what has come to be known since as a Prince Albert piercing. He imagined asking Mrs. Crapston-Bigge if she knew what that was, and then having to explain it to her. What euphemism would he employ to mention the male body part Of the Royal Prince, to Victorian sensibilities all but unmentionable: his banana? his plonker? his

chopper? She surely wouldn't know what a schlong was, he thought. And with that absurdity he inadvertently laughed out loud.

"You find this amusing, do you?" She was working herself into a lather. "We are bringing salvation to the heathen masses of the subcontinent of India and you see fit to laugh!"

"Oh no, I wasn't laughing at that, I was thinking of . . ."

She plowed on indignantly, "Well, with your strange dress and permissive attitudes we can only wonder if you yourself are not an instrument of the devil." With that she arose from her chair and flung her napkin onto her plate. "You are not fit company for any Christian, Mr. Connor. Come along, Samuel." The poor Reverend left his place at table, his meal only half-eaten, and meekly followed her out of the dining room. If she only knew what Adrian had actually been thinking about . . .

Mr. Torville broke the ensuing tension caused by the unexpected and dramatic departure of the couple: "I say, the old bat knows how to make a scene!"

The steward Bobrick, who loved to gossip, had indeed been listening at the door of the Captain's quarters during his interview with Adrian. Having heard only bits and pieces of the conversation, his imagination filled in what he had missed. And what he subsequently reported to crew and passengers was the extravagant, muddled concoction of an over-active mind. The crew members who had inspected the dinghy, in their turn, spread the notion that the stranger, plucked out of the sea just hours earlier, was a bringer of bad luck--the most ominous epithet in their nautical world.

Captain Fenwick soon heard all these opinions, some whispered in hushed tones, and they disturbed him greatly. The last thing any captain wants is restiveness on his ship, a mood that can get out of hand all too easily. Fenwick was a peaceful man and he strove to run a happy ship.

Mrs. Crapston-Bigge came to him first, vociferously protesting the presence of Adrian Connor aboard the *Aberdeen*, then the Second Officer nervously presenting the conclusions of the deck crew, that the stranger's presence was bad luck for the ship. It did not help at all that Adrian had made such an alarming account of himself. "*A time traveler--just what the hell was that anyway?*" thought the captain.

After lunch Adrian went up on deck again. He remained alone at the rail, eschewed by everyone, passengers and crew alike. The sea was still calm, vast and empty. The Captain approached him and immediately cut to the chase.

“Mr. Connor, I am sorry to say that I will have to renege on my offer to let you stay on board the *Aberdeen*. The passengers and crew are in an uproar and I can’t have that on my ship. I regret to tell you this, but we are putting you back in your boat.” He paused for a moment, observing Adrian with pity and regret. “I don’t know who you really are or where you are from. Frankly, I can make no sense at all of this whole episode. We will furnish you with some provisions, enough to last a few days. Perhaps you can make it to wherever you are sailing. I wish you well.” Captain Fenwick offered his hand and Adrian shook it, not completely surprised by this turn of events. The Captain’s words were the last anyone would speak to him aboard the ship.

The *Little Devil* was again lowered into the water. The crew scowled as Adrian climbed down the rope ladder. He seated himself as before. The aluminum oars were in place. The passengers and crew watched silently from the rails as the dinghy drifted away from the *Aberdeen*. There were no goodbyes, only a half-hearted wave from Tom Torville. Mrs. Ethel Crapston-Bigge turned her back to him.

*A brass band and colored streamers would have been a nice gesture,* mused Adrian. He wasn’t too put out by his removal from the ship. It had been awkward and unpleasant to be banished, but it wasn’t catastrophic. He had options. He activated the special device, Ramachandra’s time travel invention, that was safely secured on a chain around his neck. It sent the signal that he was ready to return. He hoped that Rama would be able to find him and re-transport him back to the twenty-first century before too long. Rowing to Bombay was not an appealing prospect. If there was one distinction in this whole sorry affair, it was that this would be the shortest launch into the past in the entire history of Ramachandra’s time travel experiments. He had been on board the *Aberdeen* for only a few hours.

Drifting in the solitude at sea he ruminated on his recent experience. He was amused at the thought of Mrs. Ethel Crapston-Bigge. He could imagine her as the matron of a women’s penitentiary for the incorrigible, or as the abbess of a secluded convent dedicated to the Order of the Sisters of Perpetual Misery. It made him laugh out loud to imagine her being flung off a

cliff onto a blazing funeral pyre. *Take that, Mrs. Big Crap!* A fit of uncontrollable mirth overcame him. He laughed at the ridiculous woman, at himself for attempting to pass off such a ludicrous story to the Captain, at his absurd predicament, that he was all alone and helpless in the middle of nowhere.

He slowly settled down again and stretched his legs out, making himself as comfortable as a person his size could get in a row boat. He watched the *Aberdeen* gradually disappear over the eastern horizon. A slight but refreshing breeze had come up from the north. Adrian Connor breathed in deeply, inhaling the clean sea air. There was nothing else to do now but wait.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Mueter, now retired, was previously professor of Opera and Vocal Coaching/Accompanist at the UMKC Conservatory for 25 years, then adjunct at the University of Kansas School of Music for 5 years.



## BIG RED

STEVE SCHLOZMAN

You said, that October,  
In the tall dry grass by the orchard  
When you chose to be free,  
“Again someday, maybe ten years.”

- Gary Snyder, *December at Yase*

I called the Ford Hatchback with the Kansas plates “Big Red.”

It was a silly joke, one that would make sense only to me. I had a red Schwinn bike well before my voice dropped. It had one of those bright red banana seats that you never see anymore but that were everywhere back when my parents had tied a bow on it and given it to me for my 8<sup>th</sup> birthday.

No helmets back then, or much of anything, really, in the way of protection. Just the certainty that it would take two, maybe three rotations on the pedals and soon the bangs would blow off of my forehead and I’d go shooting down the street and I wouldn’t stop until I shoved my left foot backwards on the pedals, skidding to a stop and imagining myself Eval Knievel.

I called my bike Big Red because it struck me as a majestic horse for the suburban subdivision that was despite its mundane surroundings a genuine corral in my imagination when I was old enough to have watched a few Westerns. It could not have occurred to me that there are not really any horses that particular tint of red. I actually knew nothing about horses. I was an upper-middle class kid, son of a doctor, living the dream of America as it retreated in haste from the lack of conventions that had taunted the status quo of the 1960’s. My mom actually had a sign in her window announcing to the neighborhood that she was an officially designated “Block Mother”, meaning kids could find safe haven and a glass of milk simply by ringing our doorbell.

These matter, all of these memories, because they selfishly guided my behavior when I fell truly in love for the first time. I’m not talking about a

crush, or even a bawdy affair, though there were of course plenty of those. This was different. This was what I had been waiting for. I was born to fall in love, made clear to me by the same romantic notions that led me to unironically refer to my Schwinn bike with the name of a fictional and unlikely stallion. I regularly undertook the hero's journey. Those crushes, that bike, the beat up Ford that followed as I got older...my coming of age...it all happened quickly and uneventfully. I was forever dreaming of love and family but unaware and untethered by any real understanding of how crisp and delicate true heart-ache could feel.

And so it was that on a hot day in July I found myself happy, relieved, and with great and noble purpose as I began at the age of 24 my trek home from California. I was driving Big Red with Beth in the passenger seat, and we were going up and up and eventually over the mountains of eastern California to meet my family, who were waiting with anticipation some 2000 miles across the country. I was triumphant, a man of the world, returning home from the frontier with both the gold and the girl.

Rickie Lee Jones was on the cassette and Beth was telling me, again, because I never tired of the story, about her mom and her mom's boyfriend Eli dropping their hot air balloon onto fields in the San Juaquin valley, stealing watermelons and almonds or maybe apricots, and then taking again to the sky, stoned out of their minds and delighting in their groovy version of Bonnie and Clyde. These were not the stories of the suburbs where I had been raised, not even in the realm of possibility. I had imagined adventures on a bike that I fancied a horse, but Beth had been reared in a communal home in Pasadena. Her mother, I was told, had from time to time announced to her children that she and Eli intended to make love before driving her children to school.

With balloons and free love to buoy me over the peaks of California, I urged my little car onward as she leaned bravely into the ascent. I recall shifting from 4<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> and sometimes even to 2<sup>nd</sup> gear, just to manage the mountain pass, as if my Ford Escort Hatchback could sense the gravity of what was to come. Big Red was carrying one person deeply in love, and another who had begun her misgivings but had either not consciously come to this conclusion or had made the merciful decision to keep it all to herself for the duration of the road trip.

Perhaps this was the reason the car stopped running. Big Red could take the charade no further. She sighed, flashed her engine light, and stubbornly refused to go on. We rolled to a stop just off of the road at the end of an exit for a tiny hillside town whose name I have forgotten but whose

weeping willow next to the highway is imprinted like a sepia photo in the recesses of my mind.

I recall that I had with me my copy of John Gardner's *Grendel*, and Grendel's mother was a real piece of work. In fact, I realize now that this whole thing, every minute of my life until then, had been about mothers, but not in a bad or cliched way. There was my Block Mother mom in Kansas, the balloon-pilot produce thief in Southern California, and the moldy maternal beast who lived deep in an undersea cave and sent her son to make happy meals of Norsemen as they stumbled around their ale halls. Despite their differences, all of these mom's held the same maternal instincts, all exerting their love onto their children. The magnetism of that love created for me a level of ongoing and naïve comfort. I was as certain as the day was long that Beth would be the mother to *my* children. I would gladly surrender control to her, and this...this passivity...*this* was my undoing.

I sat under the willow tree and opened *Grendel* to the folded down page because Beth told me she intended to pay for the repairs to my car by winning a few hands of blackjack. She had learned from her misanthrope father how to count cards (she was, after all, a math teacher) and she thought the little casino connected to the Safeway just up the hill was the ideal mark for a petite young woman to take home some winnings.

"We have my parents' credit card," I reminded her, but she pointed to the obvious:

"It's your *parents'* card. Let's do this on our own. Just you and me."

You look back on things and you wonder. If I had gone with her, or perhaps simply not mentioned my parents' credit card...would those choices have mattered? I am completely certain that some sad and relieved part of her already knew, already understood that we were finished. But if I had broken for just a second from my role as the worshipping observer, then maybe just a bit of doubt would have tripped her back in my direction. Water under the bridge, I know, but still...

All 5 foot 4 inches of Beth turned and walked up the path towards the Safeway and its unnamed casino. I sat comfortably under the willow tree, a piece of grass between my teeth, and gazed at the uncomplicated horizon.

There was wind that day. It was a hot desert breeze, not an ounce of moisture in the air, my eyes dry from dust and shade. Five minutes went by, then ten, and I was starting to doze when a shotgun blast shook me from my nap.

I stumbled to my feet and saw just up the hill and in front of the sliding glass supermarket doors a heavy set woman with beet-red hair holding a shotgun. She had her hair fixed up in an elongated bun, and this gave the ominous impression that her scalp was in fact home to a red-tinted beehive. She loaded another round into the chamber and shook the firearm back into place with a click that meant business. Beth was making her way down the path, the slightest of smiles on her face. The women with the beehive fired again into the air, and Beth refused to run, actually took her time, despite the obscenity-clad threats from the woman with the shotgun not more than 15 yards to her back.

“Time for us to go,” is what Beth said to me.

She had a bundle of cash in each hand. Until then, I had been certain that she was a girl I could choose to admire for all of my life, but her walking away, not running, while the red-headed woman behind her fired those double-barrels into the air? Beth wasn't just the one for me at that moment. She was the *only one there would ever be*. Nobody else would do.

Big Red died shortly after our drive across half of America. Beth told me just after that trip to meet my parents that we were done, and I bet that Hatchback knew better than anyone that Beth and I were not meant to be.

But if I close my eyes and surrender, I can feel the few last minutes of that marvelous dream. I am shifting from 4<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> and sometimes even to 2<sup>nd</sup> gear, just to get up and over those ignorant and soaring peaks.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Schlozman is an associate professor psychiatry and pediatrics at the University of Vermont Medical School, and the chief of the child psychiatry service at the University of Vermont Medical Center. In addition to teaching and practicing medicine, he has taught courses on horror films and neurobiology, coming of age stories and movies, and the depiction of health and physicians in popular culture. He is also a novelist and short fiction writer, with two published novels and a number of short stories.

## BRICK WALL

CHRISTIAN GADOLIN

John was jolted awake by the shrill sound of his alarm. His ex-girlfriend, Meredith, from whom he had been separated for almost two years, had once upon a time chosen her favorite animal, the armadillo, as his eternal morning companion. Since then, John had had the dubious pleasure of starting each and every morning with a high-pitched screeching in his ears.

There were two reasons he hadn't changed his alarm sound. For one, John wasn't very tech-savvy. Born in 1998, he didn't experience the analog era before the internet, yet he had never chased the latest iPhone or delved into social media. In fact, John might have significantly contributed to the LP record's resurgence. Ever since his dad gifted him an old-fashioned record player for his tenth birthday—his “real” present was an iPod, but his father quickly noticed the look of betrayal in his son's eyes—he had become an avid collector of both new and old LP records. This hobby had intensified over the past three years since John had started to work at one of the largest book publishers in his city, which allowed him to dedicate more disposable income towards expanding his collection.

However, this wasn't the main issue. He probably could have changed it himself despite his lack of technical skills or he could have asked his brother, Alec. Alec, employed at a “computer company”, the specifics of which John never quite understood, was always ready to assist, albeit with a penchant for simultaneously mocking John for his technical challenges.

The frequency of these help-and-tease sessions had increased lately as John couldn't rely on the computer department at work for his frequent email troubles anymore. His vocal criticism of the publisher's budget allocation, favoring new digital solutions over manual manuscript proofreading, had soured his relationship with the head of IT and attempts to seek their help had become futile. No, the real reason John hadn't replaced the piercing screech of the armadillo with something more soothing was that he wasn't over Meredith. She was the love of his life, the one who got away.

After John laboriously wiped the sleep from his eyes, he rose from his bed, which was placed in the largest room of his apartment, a room that served both as a bedroom and a living area. This room, aside from his bed, also contained a sofa, an old-fashioned bulky TV, and a desk where he spent his

workdays correcting manuscripts with a red pen and, much to his chagrin, using his work computer for email correspondence with colleagues and clients.

He walked through the living area to the narrow hallway. The hallway, bridging the living space and his small kitchen, housed the apartment's sole door, apart from the front entrance that led directly into the kitchen. This door opened to a surprisingly spacious bathroom, a contrast to the compactness of the rest of his studio apartment.

After completing his usual morning routine, a brief affair consisting of using the toilet, taking a quick shower, and brushing his teeth, John moved to the kitchen to prepare a cup of coffee. These days, this task required little effort. When the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated working from home, John realized his old traditional coffee maker was ill-equipped for his daily consumption of eight cups. It failed to retain heat, forcing him to brew fresh batches repeatedly.

After he had lamented this inconvenience to his brother, one day, while meticulously editing manuscripts, he was unexpectedly interrupted by the doorbell. Upon opening the door, John found no one there; instead, a package awaited him. The contactless deliveries, commonplace during the pandemic, suited him fine. His social anxiety often flared up when he spotted delivery drivers through the peephole. However, he couldn't recall ordering anything. Curiosity piqued, he scanned the vicinity of the stairwell for the deliverer to no avail. Hence, swiftly, he had brought the package inside to discover its contents.

At first glance, upon opening the package, John was perplexed by the unfamiliar device inside. It was only after perusing the manual that he recognized it as a new type of coffee machine, a "coffee pod machine," adorned with the gleaming logo of "Nespresso." Alec had sent him this gadget, partly out of consideration, but perhaps more so to tease him—a chance Alec seldom missed.

However, unexpectedly and against the odds, John grew quite fond of this new appliance. The coffee it produced was far superior to what his old machine could manage, and the device, surprisingly, was quite user-friendly, even for John. The irony that Alec hadn't had the chance to derive amusement from introducing John to technological advancements brought a self-satisfied smile to John's face as he retrieved his cup from the machine and faced the kitchen window overlooking the courtyard.

The snowstorm, which had now paralyzed the city for three days, appeared to still clutch the city in its icy grip. John deduced this much, especially since yesterday he could barely make out the snowflakes swirling outside and a faint glimmer of light emanating from his neighbor's window across the courtyard. Today, however, with the sun remaining hidden and a dense heaviness in the air, likely due to the wet snow, John mused, all he saw was engulfing darkness.

Since the storm's onset, John, already somewhat averse to social interactions because of his slight awkwardness, found himself even more reluctant to venture outdoors. The seclusion didn't bother him, it allowed more time to indulge in his beloved LP collection post-work. This particular day, though, necessitated a trip to the grocery store across the street. He was nearly out of milk, and for John, milk was an essential addition to his coffee. With a slight grunt of inconvenience, his mind briefly lingering on this bothersome errand, he turned away from the window and made his way to his desk to start today's labor.

He commenced by turning on his computer, filled with anticipation for an email from his manager about his recommendation to onboard a new writer at the publishing company. This writer had, as if out of thin air, sent him a manuscript. John had puzzled over how the author had obtained his contact details as they were not publicly available on the company's website, he had always preferred to keep a low profile at work. The manuscript, an homage to what John imagined as the writer's steadfast determination, aptly featured a story about a detective.

Despite its unsolicited nature, John found himself drawn into reading it. Once he began, he couldn't stop, a rarity among the manuscripts he encountered nowadays. Consequently, John had taken an unprecedented step to advocate for signing the author with his publisher, a bold move for him, as he was usually content working with the manuscripts assigned to him.

Once the computer finally turned on, after an agonizingly long wait that felt even lengthier than usual, John was met with disappointment. His inbox was unexpectedly empty. "How strange..." he reflected, accustomed as he was to a deluge of spam-like emails every morning. Promptly, he drafted a new email to his manager, a reminder about his earlier message.

John's excitement was palpable, it had been a long time since he felt this enthusiastic about anything at work. The task of editing manuscripts, despite his deep love for literature, a passion that had led him to major in



English Literature in college, had become a tedious routine, stripped of the initial joy it once sparked in him. No sooner had he hit send than his computer chimed with the arrival of a new email. John's spirits lifted slightly, hoping it was his manager, who was known for her late starts, responding to his first email as her first task of the day.

However, the email that had arrived was not the anticipated reply from his manager. John struggled to make sense of most of its content, but it was clear that it was some kind of error message indicating that his email hadn't been delivered. "Recipient not found..." he murmured to himself, perplexed. The issue, he deduced, seemed to stem from his internet connection, as evidenced by a 404 error page that greeted him when opening his browser instead of his usual homepage, the website of The Society for Editing. "I knew this heavy reliance on modern technology would backfire..." John thought, a hint of frustration in his mind. Resigned, he reached into his drawer and pulled out the manuscript he had planned to work on for the day.

The manuscript before him, titled *Echoes of the Night*, was penned by a newly signed horror author, a recent addition to the publishing house's roster. While the narrative had its merits, John's red pen was in constant use. Rumor had it the author was a retired academic, a fact that the writing's complexity seemed to confirm. Sentences often veered into the overly intricate, bordering on the obscure. "What a show-off," John muttered under his breath, having just deciphered the meaning of a particularly convoluted sentence.

Time flew by as he delved deeper into the manuscript. Despite struggling with the complex sentence structures, he found himself engrossed in its gripping plot, which revolved around the forbidden love between a castle lord and the widow of his late best friend. Subtle hints suggested, however, that the friend might not have fully departed to the afterlife. It was only when his right hand began to ache from constant writing that John realized it was time for a break.

Setting his pen down, John's gaze lifted to his computer screen, prominently positioned on his desk. The absence of the familiar ping sound had already hinted that no new email from his manager awaited him. Still, he couldn't help but pull the computer closer for confirmation. As he suspected, his inbox remained empty, much to his disappointment. He even checked if the internet had come back to life only to be greeted once more by that persistent 404 error page. "Looks like I'll have to call her," John thought, his reluctance palpable as his eyes began to search for his phone.

He was acutely aware of his manager's aversion to phone calls. Since the beginning of his job, John had preferred direct calls to emails for urgent matters. However, it hadn't been long at the publishing house before he encountered resistance. "Stop calling unless it's an absolute emergency. Otherwise, just send an email," his manager had firmly instructed, just three weeks into his tenure. This, somewhat hostile, directive had instantly triggered John's social anxiety, prompting an immediate and profuse apology with a promise to adhere to this new rule. Now, phone in hand, John hoped his manager would agree that this situation warranted a call. With a hesitant finger, he dialed his manager, Samantha.

The call connected, and John nervously awaited his manager's response as the dial tones rang through. Suddenly, the tones ceased, suggesting the call had been answered, but an eerie silence filled the other end. Intermittent with John's hesitant "Hellos," there was nothing but static noise at first. Then, briefly, a series of sharp, unintelligible voices fluttered in the background before the call abruptly ended.

A chill ran down John's spine. Though he had heard voices, none seemed to belong to his manager. In fact, they didn't sound human at all—too shrill and high-pitched. Confused, John pulled the phone from his ear to double-check the number. It was correct: "Samantha (Manager)" displayed clearly on his "last called" screen. Perplexed, he attempted to call again. This time, pressing the phone to his ear, he was met with complete silence. No dial tone, no static. Nothing. After a moment, he pulled the phone away, only to find its screen pitch black. Dead. He pressed the power button futilely. It was odd, the phone should have been almost fully charged, as he habitually charged it overnight. Moreover, his infrequent use meant the battery usually lasted the entire day with plenty to spare by evening.

Due to his technophobic tendencies, John still had a landline phone, but it offered little solace now. Samantha's number wasn't etched in his memory, and with the internet down, he had no way to look it up. Once again, John found himself ruminating on the frailty of modern technology's omnipresence.

Resigned, he glanced at the analog clock in the kitchen, a cherished heirloom from his grandmother, and contemplated whether this peculiar turn of events justified a break to fetch the milk. Noting that it was nearing three in the afternoon, he decided it was time. He resolved to resume work on the manuscript upon his return.

Halfheartedly, John plugged his phone into a charger near the kitchen sink even though he doubted that was the issue. He then donned his jacket, hat, gloves, and shoes, bracing himself to face the snowstorm outside. As he simultaneously opened his inward-swinging front door, a feature of the old building he lived in, he accidentally dropped his keys. Bending to retrieve them in one fluid motion, he stepped out of his apartment into the stairwell. But instead of the open space he expected, he walked straight into something massive with a thud. Startled, John staggered back, fixing his gaze directly ahead. To his utter disbelief, he found not the open space of the stairwell, but instead was faced with a solid brick wall.

John's astonishment grew as he fixated on the wall. He stared intently for a few seconds, then hesitantly reached out to touch it. The wall was frigid, shockingly so, causing John to retract his hand almost instantly before touching it again, this time letting his fingers trace the bricks' surface. The crimson red bricks were unyielding under his increasingly forceful push.

Ceasing his efforts, he knocked on the wall, listening intently for any sign of hollowness. A lack of sound confirmed his fear. It appeared to be a solid entity, with no open space behind it as evidenced by the absence of any echo or reverberation.

"What the hell is going on?" John thought, a rising tide of panic swelling within him. "The window!" he exclaimed aloud, a mix of hope and desperation in his voice. Even though his apartment was on the second floor, he figured he could survive a jump, a scenario he had often contemplated in his habitual worst-case scenario planning, like being trapped in a burning building.

Approaching the window, he was greeted by the same impenetrable darkness that had enveloped the morning. Absorbed in his work and the day's strange events, he hadn't given it much thought. Standing directly in front of the window, John's heart sank. What he had assumed to be the result of an unrisen sun, a relentless snowstorm, and amassed fog on the glass was something else entirely. Confronting him was the same sight he had encountered at his front door—a solid, crimson red, brick wall.

Panic began to churn within John. "This can't be real," he thought, grappling with the idea that he might be dreaming. Perhaps he had dozed off at his desk, his head resting peacefully on the manuscript, its unnerving storylines weaving into his subconscious and conjuring this nightmare. This possibility brought a momentary relief. The more he pondered, the more

plausible it seemed. “This has to be a dream,” he assured himself silently. “How else could brick walls suddenly block my front door and window? Only in dreams or stories do things this bizarre happen,” he mused, finding a bit of comfort in this line of thought. John knew one thing for certain: he was not the protagonist of some novel. He had never been the centerpiece of any story in his life.

Following the classic method, he pinched himself, expecting to awaken from the odd dream. Yet, when he looked again, brick walls still barred his front door and kitchen window. Despite this, John clung to the belief that he was dreaming, albeit with a sparkle of doubt.

Amid the surreal situation, John suddenly remembered the other window in his apartment, the one in his living area, which had momentarily slipped his mind. John walked through the hallway, reluctant yet expecting. He was almost sure he’d find another brick wall convinced as he was that he was caught in a dream. As such, he wasn’t surprised to face the same obstruction at this window too. A brick wall blocked all sunlight, sealing off not just the room but also John’s hopes of escaping through it.

This unsettling fact only reinforced John’s conviction that he was indeed trapped in a dream. No other explanation seemed plausible. Suddenly, he recalled the earlier anomalies with his computer and cell phone, for a moment forgotten in his shock. This realization eroded the last vestiges of doubt about his dream theory. It was inconceivable that all these bizarre events could align in real life.

To confirm his suspicions, he went back to the kitchen to check on his cell phone. As he pressed the power button, hoping to see it spring to life, he returned to the living area. There, his computer screen was ominously black, unresponsive to his fervent attempts to revive it. His phone, too, refused to awaken. With little hope, John tried his landline in the kitchen, but to no avail. There was no dial tone and pressing the numbered buttons yielded no response.

His TV shared the same fate, remaining lifeless despite his efforts. After exhausting all means of contact with the outside world, a resigned sigh escaped him. “At least the electricity is still working,” he muttered to himself, trying to find a sliver of solace in his bizarre isolation.

“Now what?” John pondered, grappling with his surreal predicament. If indeed he was ensnared in a dream, how could he escape it? The common tactic of pinching himself had failed. While wrestling with this puzzle, John

remembered a manuscript he had once edited. The story eerily mirrored his current situation: a protagonist trapped in a dream, unable to break free. In the narrative, the character managed to return to reality by falling asleep within the dream, subsequently waking up in his bed in the real world. “But how on earth am I supposed to fall asleep in a situation like this?” John wondered. Despite his conviction that he was dreaming, the idea of achieving a state of relaxation deep enough to induce sleep in these bizarre circumstances seemed an insurmountable challenge.

John’s thoughts drifted to a particular jar of pills nestled in his bathroom cabinet. They were prescribed to him just after Meredith’s departure when sleep eluded him, and existential anxiety overwhelmed his every waking moment. Uncertain if the rules of the dream world mirror those of reality, he figured it was worth a try. He made his way to the bathroom, retrieved the pills, and then fetched a glass of water from the kitchen.

Settling into his bed, John opened the jar and gazed at the small, cylindrical white pills. Normally, just one was enough to invite sleep, as prescribed. But tonight, under these extraordinary circumstances, he decided to deviate from the norm. He carefully took out four pills, a significant increase, aiming for a quick and potent effect. As he swallowed the pills with a gulp of water, John closed his eyes and thought, “Let’s hope this works,” silently yearning for a quick escape into slumber. The pills swiftly took hold, and soon, John was deep in sleep.

Opening his eyes, John was met with a grogginess reminiscent of a singular previous experience in his life, specifically the day after a frat party he had attended with a college roommate. The overwhelming feeling had convinced him to steer clear of such excessive drinking and the crowds that indulged in it. It simply wasn’t for him.

As he managed to drag himself out of bed, his gaze was unconsciously drawn to the window. To his dismay, the brick wall loomed as a daunting barrier just as it had yesterday, signaling his continued entrapment. “I must not be dreaming,” John thought to himself, his mind racing to figure out his next steps to escape the dire situation.

But first things first: breakfast. In all the commotion yesterday, he had forgotten to eat, and his growling stomach now reminded him of the need to refuel. Intent on getting something to eat, he headed toward the hallway leading to his kitchen. Yet, as soon as he stepped into the hallway, he stopped

dead in his tracks. Where at its end there should have been the opening to his kitchen, now stood another brick wall.

With his legs failing him, John collapsed on the floor in a hunched sitting position in front of the brick wall. Hopelessness filled his very being. Trying somehow to make sense of the situation, John pondered if he might be in a coma. He remembered he had read somewhere that these sorts of things could happen to people in comas. People in comas can be living out their whole lives in their minds, despite being seemingly unaware of anything in the outer world. If that was the case, was there a symbolic meaning to what was happening to him or perhaps some insight he needed to realize to wake up?

John brushed away the thought and somehow collected a new will to act. The grim reality set in. His apartment had shrunk, losing a room since yesterday. This alarming change ignited a renewed determination within him. Faced with the prospect of his living space further diminishing, John knew he must find a way out before it was too late. If the brick walls hindered him from leaving his apartment, perhaps there were other ways to make contact with the outer world.

In a departure from his usual calm demeanor, John erupted into a frenzy unlike anything he'd ever exhibited before. He launched into a full-blown rampage, pounding on the walls, stomping on the floor, and shouting at the top of his lungs. "Hellooo! Can anyone hear me? Help me, I'm stuck!" he bellowed repeatedly, pausing every few minutes to listen for any response or distant sound. Each time, an oppressive silence greeted him. His frenzy carried him from the living area to the bathroom, where he struck the tiles with such force that they reverberated. He banged on every visible pipe with all his might, but the result was the same as in the living area: nothing. No response.

Pressing his ear against each wall in turn, he strained to hear something: the usual sounds of neighbors, their TVs, their arguments—anything. But today, there was only silence. As his tantrum yielded no results, John wearily attempted to turn on his computer, phone, and TV. The outcome was as fruitless as the day before; none of the devices responded. The electricity, indicated by the light from his lamps, was still on, though the bulbs seemed to flicker and were more faded than usual. Somewhat resigned, John realized what he must do next. It was time to confront his nemesis head-on.

Grasping the heaviest object within reach, a hefty iron candle holder, once a gift from Meredith's mother, he approached the brick wall. Gently, he

traced its rugged surface, which exuded the same bone-chilling cold as when he first encountered it. As he examined it closely, the crimson hue of the bricks seemed to have deepened, now eerily reminiscent of the color of blood. Gripping the candle holder with both hands, John launched an attack on the wall. The force of his strikes was fierce, but after several attempts, he paused to assess the damage.

Despite the relentless assault, the wall was barely scathed, the targeted brick showing only minor dents. These aren't ordinary bricks, John realized, panting from his exertions. After a half-hour of strenuous effort, fatigue overcame him. He stepped back, surveying the minor crumbles he'd managed to inflict. At this rate, dismantling the wall brick by brick seemed an impossible feat. John acknowledged he needed a different strategy, a new approach to breach this inexplicable barrier.

Taking a brief respite in the still-functional toilet, a small yet comforting reminder of normalcy, John contemplated his dwindling options. He mulled over the possibility of either tearing down the apartment's other walls or making a hole through his ceiling or floor. The thought of dismantling the toilet seat or basin also crossed his mind. "No, that won't achieve anything," he concluded.

The walls, ceiling, and floor were solid concrete, and he suspected the same impenetrable bricks that blocked his other exits lurked behind them. Even if he could remove the toilet and basin, escaping through the drain was out of the question—the opening was far too small. Sipping some water from the faucet, John solidified his resolve. His decision was made: to continue attacking the brick wall leading to the kitchen, disregarding the one blocking his window due to its impractical working position. And now, armed with a clearer strategy and renewed determination, he knew exactly how to do it.

Standing again before the brick wall, John cautiously knocked on it. A faint echo responded, hinting that the wall might not be as solid as the one blocking his stairwell. Puzzled as to why he hadn't thought to do this earlier, John shrugged off the thought, knowing it wouldn't have changed his situation. John resumed his assault on the brick wall but with a refined approach. This time, he directed his efforts not at the bricks themselves but at their binding element—the mortar. He positioned the sharp end of the candle holder's base against the mortar, focusing his strikes with precision.

With each strike of the sharp end, the mortar yielded more easily than the bricks, crumbling and breaking away. This brought a glimmer of hope to

John. Diligently, he kept at his task, relentlessly attacking the mortar. The process was slow and grueling, hours if John were to guess, but gradually the mortar around one particular brick loosened enough for him to consider extracting it. Eventually, after a final forceful hit, the brick began to move.

Setting aside the candle holder, John carefully wrapped his fingers around the brick, feeling the hollow space left by the crumbling mortar. With some effort, he wiggled and pulled until, finally, the brick came loose. Eagerly, John peered through the newly created gap, only to be met with a disheartening sight. Behind the removed brick lay another, effectively replacing the one he had just painstakingly extracted.

John's grip loosened, allowing the brick to drop to the floor with a hollow thud, echoing his own sense of defeat. This overwhelming feeling of helplessness wasn't new to him, it reminded him of the despair he felt when Meredith first expressed her unhappiness in their relationship, a situation where he also felt clueless and overwhelmed. The chaotic frenzy of his recent actions—screaming, banging, and hammering, had yielded no results, no external acknowledgment or rescue.

The task of dismantling the brick wall brick by brick seemed insurmountable, a futile endeavor that could take a lifetime. Exhausted and out of options, John contemplated the possibility of returning to bed. Despite the improbability, he clung to the hope that this might all be a dream after all. "What else is there to do?" he thought to himself, a mix of resignation and exhaustion in his thoughts. Perhaps, he speculated, the next time he wakes, everything will have returned to normal. In the absence of any viable alternative, the allure of sleep beckoned, offering a temporary respite from the inexplicable reality that confined him.

His weary eyes fell upon the face of his analog wristwatch, a steadfast companion. To John's dismay, he found it sharing the same fate as his other devices, the hands frozen in time, the rhythmic ticking silenced. Even unaware of the time, John felt completely exhausted while simultaneously lacking any clear direction.

He fetched his glass from the bedside table, headed to the bathroom, and refilled it with water. He took the water and pill jar with him while retrieving two pills from it, a calculated choice. He wanted to avoid the grogginess that plagued him earlier, yet he also desired a swift escape into sleep, free from the torturous cycle of his thoughts. "What's the point in overthinking now?" he reasoned, his mind weary of the inexplicable events



around him. After taking the pills, John lay down, finding it initially challenging to drift off despite his tiredness. Eventually, the gentle pull of sleep overtook him, and soon, his quiet snores filled the room.

The next time John opened his eyes, he found himself engulfed in a darkness so profound it was akin to a void. His hand instinctively reached for the bedside lamp, tugging the string that normally bathed the room in light. There was no response, not even a flicker. The lamp remained lifeless, joining the ranks of the modern conveniences that had deserted him.

Rising from his bed, John's movements were hesitant, almost fearful, as he navigated through the pitch-black room toward the hallway. Arms outstretched, seeking guidance in the blindness, his hands eventually collided with a surface chillingly familiar. It was the rough texture of bricks. Slowly, his hands explored the expanse of this new barrier, his heart sinking as realization dawned. Where the hallway once led to the rest of his apartment, there now stood an unyielding brick wall. His world, already constricted, had now shrunk further, leaving him confined to what was once merely a living area, now his entire domain.

John wearily made his way back to his bed, navigating through the engulfing darkness with a sense of resignation. Collapsing onto the mattress, a heavy sigh escaped him. "So, this might be how it all ends," John contemplated silently, the weight of his situation pressing down on him. His mind raced through his limited options, each more futile than the last.

The exhaustive efforts of the previous day, the relentless screaming, the forceful banging, the futile hammering, seemed pointless to repeat. They had brought no salvation, no escape from this nightmarish reality. No one had heard his cries, no one had come to his aid. The brick wall, his unyielding captor, stood mockingly resistant to his endeavors. As John reflected on the pattern of the past three days, of hope diminishing with each supposed sunrise, he couldn't help but feel a deepening sense of despair. The future, if the past was any indicator, didn't bode well for him.

This realization steered John's thoughts away from potential escape plans, leading him instead to reflect on his life choices, particularly those tinged with regret. A wave of unfamiliar and unacknowledged anger began to surge within him as he contemplated the limitations his social awkwardness had imposed on his life, especially in forming close friendships.

This self-directed anger soon shifted focus. He brooded over his inability to respond effectively when Meredith had expressed the need to

work on their relationship. Further fueling his frustration was the realization that he never allowed himself to even consider starting a new relationship after her.

But John's contemplation of past regrets was short-lived. "What good does it do to dwell on these things now?" he wondered to himself. His eyes drifted resignedly to the pill jar on his bedside table. "At least this way, it's on my terms," John contemplated as he reached for the jar. He extracted the remaining pills, his movements lethargic and almost mechanical. As the pills approached his lips, John found himself praying, an act he hadn't engaged in since childhood when his mother insisted on it. The only prayer he remembered was thus that of a child. As he whispered the final words, "...and wake me with the morning light," he swallowed the pills with the last sip of yesterday's water. And then, finding comfort in his rare case of resolve, John closed his eyes.

**END**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christian Gadolin is an Associate Professor with a background in scientific writing, often focusing on organizational development in public sector contexts. However, his passion extends beyond academia. A lifelong enthusiast of horror, Christian has a keen interest in human behavior and the unknown, which has inspired him to explore writing in the horror genre.

## CANTUCCINI

JOHN BEST

She stared at her distorted image in the stainless steel of the Viking range on the other side of the kitchen. It was seldom used, so the housekeeper had to polish it only once a week. It shone. Her face shone in the reflection. The kitchen, like every room in the unit, had been carefully decorated, down to the silk nasturtiums in a vase on the table. She looked down at her breakfast: one soft-boiled egg, one piece of toast, no butter, a cup of tea. One egg. She'd had her ovulation pain last night—her *mittelschmerz* (she hadn't known that word until she was in college). She remembered the gynecologist telling her how lucky she was. "That will make planning your family very easy," he'd said. She ate her breakfast.

The housekeeper approached the table. "Would you like your *cantuccini* now, Beth?" she said, "before your tea gets cold?"

"Yes, Corazon, thank you."

The housekeeper had arranged a few of the miniature almond cookies artfully on a dessert plate, which was now silently placed on the table. Beth had dawdled through her morning routine, including breakfast, and her tea was cooling off quickly. Still, she slowly immersed the first *cantuccino* in the tea, watching as the air bubbles trapped within it emerged, shimmering for a second below the surface before, in a crazy rush, rising to the top and breaking. Beth sucked the tea from the biscuit; it had softened, but only slightly. Still almost as crunchy as dry shredded wheat.

Her husband, Jason Adler, now entered the kitchen, having completed his workout on the Peloton in the exercise room. Forty years old, yes, thought Beth, but ageless. No encroachment of grey hair. The still-dazzling smile. In the kitchen, Jason moved with a fluid speed, like an animal suddenly unfettered. But with the precision that would be expected of an up-and-coming cardiothoracic surgeon. He had already eaten. Now he gave one of those quick smiles to Beth, who rose to greet him, drawing herself close and whispering in his ear: She had just ovulated. "So, maybe we could, you know, get together tonight?" she asked.

Jason's grin tensed a little, but after checking that the housekeeper had retreated to another room, he pressed a hand, warm from the workout, on his wife's skirt, cupping her groin. She noted, as she had before, that his eyes could

become as beaded as a skink's when there was something he didn't want others to see in them. At other times, all she saw were the stars of a galaxy wheeling their way into infinity.

"Keep it warm for me," said Jason, his fingers pressing firmly against her. "We'll see. I still have a full day ahead of me. The VSD for this morning got delayed on a technicality. And there's another procedure scheduled for this afternoon." He withdrew his hand. She once welcomed his raw familiarity with her body. Now? Sometimes she didn't know how she felt. His fitness watch buzzed; he snapped his wrist forward and scanned it.

"The VSD is on. Gotta run," he said. "If you see Dad, tell him I said hi."

"Will do. See you later." She tried to keep her voice perky.

She put the half-full teacup in the microwave. As the timer went off, her father-in-law came into the kitchen.

"Good morning, Beth," he said. The cool tone in his voice hadn't always been there. Not when they were first married, but it had appeared soon after.

"Good morning, Joseph. I'll be out of your way in just a minute. Jason said 'hi,' by the way."

"No need to hurry. I have a very busy day of doing practically nothing ahead of me."

She managed a polite smile. Joseph had been living with them for only a month or so; company manners still prevailed. Beth mentally prepared for the already-routine scene that was about to take place as he, for whatever reason, pretended to look around on the counter for what he was after, even though the housekeeper put them in exactly the same place every day.

"Ah!" he said after a few seconds. "Here they are." The two cream-filled donuts Joseph ate every day for breakfast had arrived about twenty minutes earlier. He had a standing order for their delivery. "I'll just take these into the living room," he said as left.

Beth studied Joseph as he walked away from her down the hallway, staring at him as if she might glean the important nugget about him that had continued to elude her. At seventy, Joseph had no obvious ailments. And he was comfortably well-off. He could have continued living on his own, she knew. But, as Jason said when he persuaded her to let his father come live with them, the big house in Connecticut was no longer needed since Joseph's wife had died a few years back. The fact that Joseph was now ensconced in the

room that they had other plans for rankled Beth, but she brushed that thought aside. She took another look at her reflection in the range. Thirty-five. Still beautiful, sure. But did that matter anymore? Then she turned sideways and took a hard look at her body in the steel range's reflection. Her belly. As flat as Jason's. As flat as a boy's. It was time to go to work. Her time on the hated Peloton would come in the evening before dinner.

Beth exited their building on East 86th Street and immediately blended into the street scene—just one more young, professionally dressed woman walking through the Yorkville neighborhood on a bright September morning. Calling it a neighborhood was the height of something, she thought. Was it supposed to imply a sense of community? That was false. She didn't know any of their neighbors, and neither did Jason. Some of their acquaintances came from other parts of the Upper East Side, but most came from elsewhere in Manhattan.

She boarded the Q Train at 86th and found a seat. At 50th, the person sitting beside her disembarked, and a mother who had just boarded with her daughter in tow quickly seized the vacated spot. They fell into the seat as the train took off with a lurch. Beth slid over a bit. The logo of the American Girl store was emblazoned on the plastic bag the little girl held on her lap. And from this bag, the girl extracted a doll, still in its packaging, obviously just purchased. Beth noticed the girl's eyes studiously scanning all the details of the doll as if they might contain some secret knowledge.

"Maryellen Larkin," Beth said, tapping the package. "That's one of my favorite American Girls too!"

The little girl sharply broke her fixation on the doll and pivoted her head to Beth, with eyes now as guarded as those of any seasoned New Yorker's. Then the girl swiveled her head the other way to the blasé mother whose gaze remained locked on her phone. Then back to Beth, who saw the girl was obviously impressed that she knew the doll's name.

"Do you have one too?" the girl asked in a conspiratorial voice, as if admitting Beth to a secret society on the basis of this shared bond.

"No, honey, but I did have one when I was your age."

"I'm seven," the girl replied.

"I thought that was about how old you were. When I was seven, my doll was Kirsten Larson."

"I like Kirsten too."

The train had come into the station at 34th Street. “Let’s go, Hayley,” the mother said abruptly, her kohl-eyes showing no emotion as she flicked her gaze at Beth for less than a second. “You’re bothering the lady, and this is our stop.”

As the doors closed, the girl smiled from the platform and waved goodbye, hair flowing behind her as her mother pulled her along. Dark hair, Beth thought. Dark like mine.

The train made its screeching way south to Fulton Street, where Beth customarily disembarked. The station was a block away from the World Trade Center site. She remembered the video footage: people, strangers really, holding hands, jumping from the opened windows and disappearing forever into the billowing black smoke below. All those lives, taken away before their time. Just like that. She hurried around the corner to her office on John Street.

Beth had been working for an NGO, Water for the Children of Africa, for almost two years. After getting her Master’s in social work from Northwestern, her first job had involved field work in Namibia. When this NGO job opened up, it had seemed like a natural fit for her. She knew the Board thought she was their rising star. That had a lot to do with her recent promotion to Director of Development. Not only could she write a grant, but she was effective with the wealthy donors, who considered her one of them.

September flew by, but the weather remained warm in New York City. In early October, the leaves on the trees of Manhattan had still only just begun to turn. One day Beth arrived at the office before a meeting with the philanthropist who had most recently expressed interest in the charity’s work. Beth scanned her office to make sure every detail was in place, including the diploma behind her desk. Elizabeth Linden. Had it really been only eight years since she was known as Beth Linden? It felt like she’d been married to Jason for much longer than that.

The receptionist rapped lightly on the door and opened it. “Beth, Mrs. Lefebvre is here.”

“Yes, please show her in.” Beth rose to greet the middle-aged woman who followed the receptionist. They all had a certain sameness: their expensive suits in whatever color was that year’s prescribed fashion, their hair, their nails. “Please have a seat, Mrs. Lefebvre. So good of you to come in. Would you like a cup of tea before we get started?”

“No, that’s quite all right. May I call you Beth?”

“Yes, I’d prefer that you do, actually.”

“I must say, Beth, when you discussed your work at that function the other night, my eyes were opened. I had no idea the problems children in Africa face just to have clean water.”

Beth nodded. “I think you’ll find this brief video very informative.” She used the remote to lower the screen behind her, while she took a chair beside Mrs. Lefebvre. Then she dimmed the lights and started the carefully crafted performance. The parade of children, their large eyes filled with despair as they looked away; the ravaging effects of cholera and dysentery shown in minute and unsparring detail. Then the brigade of young and confident engineers discussing how clean water could be brought to the villages, “if only there was support.” Finally, the children again, their needs met, forgetful of their previous plight, bumptious, and jostling to appear on camera.

Beth brought the lights up after the video ended. Mrs. Lefebvre’s eyes were moist. Without comment, Beth handed her a tissue.

“It makes you realize, Beth, how terribly lucky our children are to have been born here, where they have every advantage, instead of someplace like that. The circumstances of life are so chancy as to who gets what, are they not? I’ll discuss this with my husband, but I’m sure he’ll want to help just as much as I do.”

After the woman left, Beth went over their meeting. Mrs. Lefebvre had assumed that Beth had children of her own. Had she projected some kind of unintended signal? She thought back to that night almost eight years ago. It was shortly after they were married. Jason always took the responsibility for contraception, which she appreciated. She had offered anyway, but Jason countered with his usual logic. “Why take an unnecessary pill, Beth, with its side effects like nausea or headaches?” But that night, for whatever reason, he had skipped the condom.

The intercom on her desk blinked. It was the receptionist. Alex wanted a word. The debriefing with the COO following a meeting with a potential donor was protocol. Beth left her office and walked to the glass box in the middle of the open floor plan. It was unoccupied. She looked around and saw Alex Brodhaus conferring with an associate several desks away. When Alex saw Beth, he waved her into his office. The interior was quiet, unadorned, ascetic. A spreadsheet glowed on the monitor. Beth saw her reflection in the glass wall, the vibrancy of her lipstick contrasting with the monochromaticity of the space. Alex had furnished the office with a small stereo on which a song



was playing from what Beth figured were Alex's younger days. She listened for a moment. The singer pledging his never-ending love, the couple planning their future together: pretty thoughts.

Alex's arrival jolted her out of the reverie she had slipped into. "Well, Beth," he said, "I saw Mrs. Lefebvre at the elevator. She was still dabbing her eyes. Looks like you knocked it out of the park again. I'm sure we'll be receiving a major donation soon. Might as well get my gratitude speech ready for the reception." He smiled.

Beth acknowledged the compliment. She knew the organization was doing good work, and she was grateful for the opportunity to make the contribution she did. It was just that she thought she'd be a little farther along with some of the other things that mattered in life. She was in her mid-thirties, after all. And, she thought, her good works did nothing to assuage her guilt.

That evening, Beth hurried off the train at 86th Street as usual. Daylight Saving Time had not yet ended. The sun rode low in the sky, but it was still light and the air was mild. Ahead, the tall trees of Central Park beckoned. She hesitated, but just for a second. The Peloton could wait a little longer. She walked past their apartment building and found a bench in the park. The sun's gentle light scattered itself through the waving leaves. Traffic noise was muffled and indistinct as the birds' ceaseless chattering came to the foreground. Some of them would overwinter in the park; most would soon be departing. A few people, seniors, padded cautiously along the pathway, smiling and nodding as they passed. Her senses blurred as if covered with a sweet glaze. Her breathing slowed. She turned her face to the light, and, refreshed, she rose.

At the corner, the cacophony on Fifth Avenue again assailed her. A squirrel scampered from a tree and into the street. A taxi immediately ran it over, the animal's vital blood spurting onto the cracked asphalt. Alive a second ago, now just a piece of gooey offal in the street.

"Why do you want to see it, Beth?"

"I don't know. I just do. I want you to see it too." She remembered how he nodded, but wouldn't look at her.

It was only a few days after Beth's respite in Central Park when her father-in-law paused on the verge of enacting his breakfast ritual. Glancing at Beth, he took a chair at the kitchen table across from her.

“Beth, I know you think that I’m just caught up in the past, in my own little world. I admit I’ve been very, let’s say, reticent these last couple of months. But still, I want you to know how much I appreciate that you’ve taken me in. It’s given me the chance to observe so much about you and Jason in my time together with you.”

“I’m sure you have, Joseph.” His entrée was new, but his forthcoming message was not. When they were first married, Jason’s parents seemed to adore her. But they cooled. Now, Joseph often hinted vaguely about what she might do to improve her life with her husband. She tried to think of a way to get out of a lecture, but there were no openings.

“I know you’re committed to your work, Beth. And that speaks volumes about your character. But do you really want to grow old knowing you’ve given your whole life away for people you will never meet? There’s more to life than work, after all.”

Tell your son, she thought. “Jason and I have talked all about that, Joseph.” She made her voice soothing, as though she were speaking with a donor. “And I can also tell you that Jason is so glad you’re here.” She realized her mistake as soon as the words had flown from her mouth: “*Jason* is so glad,” not “*We’re* so glad.” Joseph caught the mistake, and smiled at this small victory.

“Thank you, Beth. That means so much to me.”

But on the way to work, Beth thought about what Joseph had said. She and Jason *had* talked all about the future. And Jason was always positive, even after what had happened. “Sure, someday,” he’d said. “When the time is right. But kids are a lot of trouble, and they’re expensive, too. For now, let’s just keep this between ourselves, okay? We need to be sure before we go ahead with something we might regret.”

Might regret. Did Jason ever have any regrets? The occasional lights in the tunnel whooshed past the subway car.

The crisis came just a few weeks later, in early November. Joseph entered the kitchen at breakfast, but instead of the little theatre piece with the donuts, he complained about the limited mobility and weakness in his arm. He demonstrated it for Beth. He couldn’t move his arm freely, and his grip was weak. “I must have slept on it funny,” he said. “It’ll go away in a little while.”

But it didn’t. The problem was still there at dinner time.

“It’s been like that all day?” Jason asked.

“Yeah. It doesn’t hurt. It’s just annoying.”

“Dad, you can’t pick up a coffee cup. You’ll have to be seen. I’ll set it up.”

Joseph looked as though he might be on the verge of a protest. But he stifled it. Two days later, smiling broadly, he gave Jason and Beth a thumbs-up as he was rolled into the MRI.

When Oncology called just a few days after the scan, it was clear that Joseph’s situation was urgent. Jason exuded a tension in the oncologist’s office that Beth had rarely seen. Now the oncologist entered with a printout. Both Jason and Beth moved forward in their chairs ever so slightly.

“Dr. Adler,” the oncologist began, “we’ve identified the cause of your father’s impairment. There’s a tumor in the frontal lobe of his left hemisphere.”

“How big is the tumor? Is it operable?”

“I’m afraid not.” The oncologist hesitated. “We can radiate the brain area, but that’s frankly just palliative care, because there’s a bigger problem. As the scan shows, the brain tumor is most likely a metastasis from his lung. And unfortunately, there are numerous other anomalies and suspicious irregularities in his bones and organs that are consistent with extensive cancer. You can review this report later; I’m sure it will be comprehensible to you.” He handed the document across the desk.

Jason quickly scanned it, then slowly put it down. “How long?” he said.

“I think we’re probably looking at weeks, rather than days.”

“Weeks!”

But the oncologist misunderstood. “That’s right. He’ll have some time to tie up whatever loose ends there may be. Most of the time the seniors are pretty well prepared for that anyway.”

“Does he know?”

The oncologist slowly shook his head. “We’ve found it’s best if they hear it from the family. I’m sorry the news couldn’t have been better.”

In the corridor outside the office, Beth put her arm around Jason. He didn’t seem to register it. “How am I going to tell him?” he wondered aloud.

“We’ll find a way,” she said. Jason nodded, but he kept his gaze focused straight ahead.

Joseph received the news with a somber equanimity. “I could tell by the way my body has been feeling, there was something seriously wrong with me,” he said. “It’s okay, really. I’ve had a great life. And I’m not gone yet, after all!”

But his condition began to deteriorate almost immediately. A hospital bed appeared in their home, along with a commode. Their routine revolved around the fentanyl patches; Beth saw the dosage levels increasing every few days. Joseph began toying with his food, and when he stopped eating altogether in the first week of December, both Jason and Beth knew that his needs had finally exceeded their ability to care for him. They were exhausted.

The windowpanes of the hospital room were blurring as the sleeting rain blasted against them. In the parking lot below, the accumulating water meandered in a slow-moving river, hissing and spiculed in the pelting frozen drops. The Christmas ornaments on the bordering trees danced crazily in the wind. Jason and Beth had hurried to the hospital on that grey December morning; Jason hadn’t eaten. When the nurse assured him that it probably wouldn’t be today, he decided he had time to get breakfast.

“Call me if anything changes, okay? I won’t be gone long.”

“Sure. He seems to be resting comfortably right now.”

Beth opened her laptop and began to work. But a minute later, she felt something and looked up. Joseph’s eyes were open and fixed on her with an intensity she had never seen. He raised a palm weakly. She went to the bedside. He searched for his voice; finally a phlegmy, congested whisper emerged. “Where’s . . . Jason?”

“He just stepped out. He’ll be back soon.”

Joseph closed his eyes for a second, then reopened them. “Would have been better . . . Beth, if you kept the baby . . . the way Jason wanted you to . . . he . . . so heartbroken.”

“What? What did you just say, Joseph?”

“The baby . . . you terminated seven years ago . . . we never let on we knew . . . Jason still protected you . . . Don’t tell Beth you know . . . sore subject . . . time’s not right, she said . . . her job . . . Beth, why didn’t you want the baby? . . . Beth, why didn’t you?”

Her hands rested lightly on the rails of the hospital bed as if an electric current might erupt from it without warning. Her thoughts were like jagged

lightning bolts fractaling down to fragments before extinguishing themselves into blackness. She looked out the ice-covered window and saw nothing. Finally, her voice came to her from a million miles away. "Let's not discuss that now, Joseph. Why don't you rest for a bit?"

He closed his eyes and seemed to relax into his pillow. Jason returned twenty minutes later. "Any change?" he asked.

"He opened his eyes and mumbled a few things."

"Things? What things?"

"I don't know. I couldn't make them out."

"Well, did you try? Christ, Beth!" He ran his hand nervously through his hair.

But Joseph Adler did not speak again that day, nor the next. And on the evening of the following day, he died without ever regaining consciousness.

A week after the funeral, they had not yet begun to sort out any of the remnants of his life. Beth sat at breakfast alone. She glanced at the wavy image of herself in the polished range. The cream donuts lay uneaten in their usual place on the counter; no one had thought to cancel the standing order for their delivery. The housekeeper asked Beth if she wanted her *cantuccini*, as usual.

Beth paused before replying. The donuts were only a few feet away. "No, Corazon, not today. But I think I'd like one of the cream donuts instead, please." It was now placed silently on the table.

Beth hadn't had a cream donut since college. It was larger than she remembered. This must have four hundred calories all by itself, she thought. She picked up the donut, surprised at its palpable, almost organic softness. She bit into it with tenderness. The donut yielded immediately to her teeth, the cream filling, gelatinous and unctuous, jetting into her mouth even with the tentativeness of her first bite. The filling coated her tongue with a sweet, oily uniformity. She took a sip of tea to clear her mouth, the cooling tea that was astringent and bitter. Yes, of course, she thought, as she bit into the donut again more forcefully.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Best is professor emeritus of cognitive science from Eastern Illinois University, where he taught for 34 years. His current academic project involves an analysis of the theory of moral reasoning of Immanuel Kant from the standpoint of its applicability to certain principles and findings from cognitive science.

## EN LA COMPAÑÍA DE LOS SANTOS

JARED BERNARD

The drum pounds and the gaiteiros start up their bagpipes, and I hear clapping in time from balconies above me. A red and purple mulberry tree made of humans sways just a bit as I climb up it. What a bizarre thing, staring a burly man in the face and stepping on his knee. Can I put my hand on this shoulder, step on this head? I feel like I could get locked up for this, but that's what makes my eyes widen and my fingers reach for the next person's waist and crawl up him. Gripping the strong shoulders of a small man, I pull myself up and try to balance myself, and then I'm at the top. Turning my head, I realize that I'm now looking down on those balconies, the people on the street down below. My lungs fill up and I can't help but laugh a bit. To become branches, my arms stick straight out, and I glance over to the top of a second tree to see another enxaneta, or rider, like me but a girl. Something about her hits me, and I flash my eyes away, down to the crowd. But I peek again. Her dark eyebrows and determined expression... She ignores me, refusing to break her concentration, but I can't help glancing back. The cheering comes to a climax and I lift my arms higher, drinking it in before climbing down to find a motorcade waiting for me, and the commotion of the spectators fades.

'Get in the carriage, little brother,' Alejandro commands me, and the driver holds open the door emblazoned with the stupid crest of Xunta Suprema del Reino de Galicia. I slink in and am taken to the Pazo de Raxoi for scolding. 'It was your first time and it will be your last,' my brother sneers as we jostle along the bumpy road, as if I wouldn't hear the same from my father. Propriety needs to be upheld during this critical time for Galicia, I'm told, and associating with proletarians would disgrace the local administration, even for nobility not destined for inheritance... meaning me. But the whole time my father yells at me, I simply stare at the white marble floor thinking of the enxaneta girl.

Some sort of obsession is coursing through me, and it seems to be not just for the enxaneta and her dark serious eyes, but for something else, something unidentifiable. With a lamp in the dusk, I navigate through the tunnel-vaulted corridors to see my other brother, Sergi, a year younger than Alejandro. 'Take me to *El Sí de las Niñas*.' This drama premieres tonight and I've seen the posters around town—there are girls on them.

Although I'm supposed to be forbidden to leave the palace as punishment, Sergi has been willing to bend the rules before. A couple years ago he snuck me out to see the ocean, which I'd only seen from a ways off or else from within a boat. The gigantic waves smashed against the coast and a strange combination of awe and dread took hold of me. Sergi charged straight in like a fool, telling me to come on, and our tiny bodies approached the wall of thrashing water. He turned into an arrow and shot under the rolling wave, which was on the verge of crushing me until I also shot underwater in a panic. When I surfaced again, the water was much calmer and there was Sergi, grinning at me.

Now Sergi's eyes look glassy in the light of my lantern. 'Wait a few days,' he says, 'then we'll see.'

This is a 'dangerous time' for Galicia, as even I know. Six years ago, the townspeople rioted after the Xunta de Galicia decided not to support Charles IV's son anymore. I'm not sure how we ended up switching sides, but later a revolt against Joseph Bonaparte broke out and our province was marked as traitorous. It's all so confusing, like when I try to see outside through the distorted glass in my windows. But I want to do... something. I've even wished I could fight in the rebellion. Four years ago, back when I was nine, the enemy was kicked out of Coruña and everyone was so excited—if only I could do *something!* In the shadow of Saint James the Great's resting place, I slip away from the palace into the twilight. I can't wait for Sergi any longer.

In the theatre, the audience is mesmerized by Francisca, whose mother is demanding she gets married to don Diego, and her sadness is like a spell on me. Of course there's also her beauty. A wave of discomfort moves through me as I remember the enxaneta girl—as if either one would notice me. Francisca's defiant love for Félix radiates across the audience and I wish I was him. A hand then grabs my shoulder, jolting me out of my stupor, and spins me to face a dark-eyed stranger with a narrow face framed by a flowing mane of grey-black.

Pressing me against the stone wall, he hisses, 'What's this?' His big nose comes so close to mine that I can see its pockmarks even in the dark. 'Can you present a scene? Come with me.'

He pulls me into a room and says, 'You're about the same size as Rafael who played the role of Calamocha,' and tosses me a costume. 'Here, learn these lines, and if you can't remember them, put yourself in the mind of the character and talk.'



Thrust in front of the spectators—a hundred pairs of eyes at least—I ask Simon why don Diego has come to Alcalá and Simon asks me the same of Félix. Each of us is forbidden by our masters to reveal their intentions for Francisca. My lungs feel like they're being squeezed at first, but then there's some sort of energy, like breathing for the first time. And being so close to Francisca definitely makes me feel kind of drunk.

'You took to the stage well,' the stranger beams as I return the props afterward.

This comment sends an anchor down in me, like part of me is diseased. 'I shouldn't be here.'

'I know who you are, who your father is,' the man says, tying his hair back. 'Don't be worried. No one else noticed thanks to your attire.' The man eyes me for a moment. 'My name is Leandro Fernández de Moratín. You know, you could come with us and perform.'

'I can't—'

'Did you understand the play? Did you see beyond the façade of a young woman who can choose for herself between love and a wealthy man of whom she knows nothing? Do you know the difficulty I had gaining administrative permission to perform this tonight? Your father was upset enough that the theme appears to be the woman's right to choose.' The man leans even closer to me to make sure others can't overhear and breathes into my ear, 'Your father initially supported the dethronement of Ferdinand, but then saw him as a puppet. As the battle continues in Vitoria, you need to think about the Kingdom of Galicia, about La Pepa. Those are not Saint James' remains in the cathedral.'

The whole thing with the playwright was weird to say the least. Something's wrong. It's as if some nameless thing is missing from me. I cross a sunlit courtyard lined by arches and wander the streets until I finally come across the muixeranga preparing for another display in the square. A meaningful whine comes from the gaiteiros who will accompany the muixeranga. A weight in my chest makes me beg the captain, who had no clue of my name before, to let me take part again. There's the enxaneta girl, getting ready and ignoring me like before. Inspired by Félix, I sort of sidestep over to her: 'I—I see how focused you are on the aixecador; not only during the demonstration, but as I lie at night and in the morning... You're very pretty.' Then the music flares and saves her from needing to respond to my babbling.

A tower grows, and I scale up over knees, shoulders, and grimacing heads to become the enxaneta. I look back down over the applauding audience.

The other enxaneta, the girl, rises to the tip of another pillar, steadying herself on top of the riser. Far below a royal carriage appears on the edge of the square. A sudden sickness comes over me. My brother's here to fetch me again and this time I know I'll be locked in the palace forever. 'Hey!' comes a voice beneath me. My eyes angle downward to meet those of the little mustachioed man holding me up. He growls, 'You need to be still!' and I try harder not to wobble.

Alejandro steps out of the carriage and appears to shout something that's drowned out by all the bagpipes and cheers. He gestures to one of the Xunta guards behind him. The guard fires a musket straight up in the air, stunning the crowd and throwing the other pillar, the one with the girl on top, off-kilter. The spire of humans sways for an instant and then shrieks ring out as people plummet down to earth into a terrible squirming pile, and my chest disintegrates.

Alejandro roars 'Attention!' over the crowd. My tower disassembles next to where the other collapsed, and I push through the dense crowd, searching for the girl, wriggling passed performers clasping snapped or crushed limbs. A scream comes from a tight cluster of people and I burrow my way in to find the girl lying on the street, unmoving. I drop to the ground next to her, with horrified faces all around me, and stare into her brown eyes.

Another shot echoes to silence the crowd's cries, and Alejandro again bellows, 'Attention!' Through the forest of multicolored legs of performers, I can make out my brother's face scanning the people with irritation. I look at the girl, her head at an odd angle, and then rush away through the crowd. In an alley, I lean against the wall, my cheek against the cold stone. 'By my authority as heir to the Xunta Suprema de Galicia, I am honored to declare our final victory over the French Invasions. Joseph Bonaparte averted our troops, but their Empire has now been expelled from our nation. Before God, reaffirm your allegiance with Ferdinand VII!' I feel my way to a safer spot behind another building. Even though there's no love for the French around here, no cheers come from the crowd, only stifled weeping over the girl.

Those brown resolute eyes are all I can see, going back and forth from bright to empty, but the rest of her face stays the same: she has just one expression. This isn't right—there's no way... I can see her face, staring at me as I blathered like an idiot a few moments ago, and then her cheek like a blunt

object against the stone street. So dumb—I can't believe I was ever fixated on Francisca. After darkness comes, I wander through the streets toward the theatre, to see Moratín. *El Sí de las Niñas* has been cancelled and the building is empty like the enxaneta girl's eyes. Not knowing what else to do, I sit in the back row, staring at the dark nothingness on stage. After a while I see Moratín standing there.

'Perhaps it'll do better in other provinces,' he jokes, wearing in his brown high-collared coat and dark cloak. 'Suddenly the radical populist ideas of the revolution are not so welcome among the aristocracy. Pretty convenient, wouldn't you say?' The man seems to analyze me. 'Hmm, well, I guess you're too young.'

All this about rebellions and politics—I don't get it, and none of it matters. It's all stupid. Those brown resolute eyes are all I can see. My throat is sticky, but I manage to mumble that I want to go with him and act in his plays.

'The new sovereignty isn't going to be "of the people" as promised when Ferdinand reclaims the throne. He'll be under the control of the church and the nobility and he won't uphold La Pepa. Alas, he's no don Diego. I'll likely need to return to Paris, where you would not be welcomed.' Moratín unties his mane of hair and then takes my hand. For an instant, I wonder if he thinks my skin is too soft, courtesy of my so-called noble birth, but I realize I don't care. His dark eyes bore into mine.

Then Moratín disappears into the black innards of the theatre and I sit there for a while, thinking of the enxaneta girl.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jared Bernard's fiction has appeared in *AntipodeanSF* and *Morpheus Tales*, and his non-fiction has appeared in *The Conversation*, *Natural History*, *History Today*, and *American Forests* among others. As a PhD candidate studying insects, he has also published in scientific journals. Jared's debut literary/speculative fiction novel, *Killing Juggernaut* (<https://www.killingjuggernaut.com>), predicts a dire future in which the fates of an ecologist, a teenager, and an astronomer are linked by humanity's last-ditch effort to save itself from environmental devastation.

## JOSEPH CROWLEY, FILMMAKER

SHAHBAZ KHAYAMBASHI

This story differs from the others in this conference<sup>1</sup> on cursed films in a variety of ways. First and foremost, our subject of study is not someone who was unknown and unappreciated in his time. Joseph Crowley—not his birth name of course—was a big name in the east coast experimental scene. He was often compared, favourably or otherwise, to Kenneth Anger, due to his unsettling imagery and use of bright colours. He was at one point connected romantically to Maya Deren, even though both denied it. He was always wherever the vanguard was, well into his final years, not to get too far ahead of ourselves here.

Crowley's experiments focused on dark themes, but frankly, there was nothing scary or troubling about them. His most famous work, the 1972 short *The Moon Hunts at Night*, a film still taught in universities as an exemplary work of the New York scene, is frequently brought up by the conspiracy minded as proof of what was to come, but despite likely being his darkest work, even his most ardent critics see little to nothing in these conspiracies. The film follows a solitary woman walking through the darkness, lit by a single spotlight as the darkness attempts to drag her out of it. Many of his contemporaries saw this film as making a great feminist statement, while others saw it as a treatise on depression. What has always been a constant is that no one who studied his work in good faith saw anything ominous in it. Even Crowley, after being pushed for an answer in the famous televised 1992 interview with Madison Argyle, simply stated that this film was about the human condition, before breaking into an uncharacteristic smile and admitting that working on it made him happy for the first time in years.

While this film was not his first, it was the dividing point between his early works and what was to come. While his earlier works were concerned with technique, this moment is often seen as the point where Crowley became more concerned with fame. He began to create films which were experimental-minded but marketable to a wider audience. His penultimate film, 1988's unfortunately lesser seen *Mugger* told the story of a criminal who

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<sup>1</sup> This conference, entitled "Cursed Cinema and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" took place in February of 2023 to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Exorcist. The keynote, presented by Dr Tyson Fernandez, entitled "Charles Crowley, Filmmaker" has been transcribed and presented here with additional notes by the presenter for your perusal.

finds it difficult to become law-abiding, eventually dying unarmed at a police stop. Despite being one of the few starring roles of Juno Anderson before her untimely death, *Mugger* was not what audiences were looking for. Despite rave reviews and some Oscar buzz, the film disappeared. Many suggest that it was the disappointment around *Mugger* that led Crowley to try his hand at his most audacious exercise in creativity. This new project is what would ultimately lead to his downfall.

A comedy.

Unlike the average “cursed film,” 1990’s *Different Folks* was Crowley’s attempt at a comedy, a straightforward one at that. The film received a wide release and developed something of a cult following before disappearing along with its creator. This film did away with any of the nuance for which Crowley had become famous: instead, *Different Folks* told the story of two very different families, the Atkinsons and the Carmichaels, who move into the same neighbourhood and find themselves in a turf war. The usual charm of Crowley was mixed in with pratfalls and innuendo, but it worked for wider audiences. The first week, the movie was only beaten in the box office by *Ghost*, gaining an unusually large viewership for a film with a cult director and no known stars. That was probably the one thing that kept the film from reaching the heights it could have: the stars of the film were all unknowns, people who were not named in the credit sequence—in fact, Crowley was the only name in the credits—and who did not seem to have any previous credits to their names. Of course, casting unknown actors was nothing new for Crowley, but *Different Folks* was not like his usual work.

The film continued to be successful for another few weeks. Audiences clamoured to see it, but what shocked many was how much the critics loved it. A generic comedy made by someone who could easily be described as a sellout did not seem like fodder for critics and yet every major American newspaper wrote raving reviews of the film, its performances, its cinematography, even the score which made use of minimalist electronic music in a masterful way. However, what Crowley scholars find fascinating about these reviews is that none of them seem to get the plot correct. Every review begins by pointing out the basic plot point of two warring neighbours, but then they begin to describe scenes that are not in the film. Roger Ebert describes a scene where a dog jumps through a window into the Carmichael house and headbutts Mr. Carmichael into a China cabinet, but this scene never occurred.<sup>2</sup> Some of

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<sup>2</sup> Author’s note: I am aware that there are several books currently in the works about Joseph Crowley and I am sure that they all have some type of description of *Different Folks*, but as

these scenes are scenes that could have occurred, but so many more of them reach outlandish heights, some critics commending the film's use of dark comedy with the incorporation of scenes including bloodletting and sacrificial rituals. It goes without saying that these scenes simply do not appear in *Different Folks*. The film's most outrageous scene is the one in which a furry creature mauls the Atkinsons' young son who is then written off as a character, but that makes perfect sense within the plot of the film, as well as within Crowley's brilliantly twisted humour.

It was around the fifth week that things began to go awry. The film which was once beloved by all was suddenly beginning to come under attack. First, the audiences stopped showing up, not because of a lack of interest, but rather because of a sense of fear. Parents began complaining that their children had become almost catatonic after viewing the film. The production company tried responding to this by raising the rating from PG to R, but that did little to help as others complained of scenes that had traumatized them, scenes which again simply did not exist in the film. Eventually, even the daring few thrill seekers began to wane as an audience. What was more bizarre was the retractions from the critics. Many of the critics stood by their reviews, but some insisted that upon re-viewing the film, the reviews did not describe what they had seen. A select few even insisted that they had no memory of seeing the film or writing the review. Scott Carmichael—no relation—was one such critic. He had begun writing film reviews for the Miami Herald shortly before *Different Folks* came out and was one of the first to give it a glowing review. However, he soon after insisted that he had never seen the film. In a retraction, he admitted that reading his own alleged review gave him a panic attack, because the film he had reviewed did not seem like something he would have liked to begin with. He promised to watch the film that week and update his review, but that update never came. A week later, Scott Carmichael was found dead with a self-inflicted cut across his throat.

This one incident eventually led to the belief that *Different Folks* was a "cursed film." This label brought with it a new audience, but Crowley did not take advantage of this newfound infamy, instead choosing to take his film out

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someone who has seen the film several times and has devoted his time to writing about Crowley's works, I would like to caution you about believing anything said in those books. I have seen this film well over twenty times at this point and what I describe in this book and elsewhere is the unquestionable truth. No, no dog ever headbutts anyone in this film. The children do not take a bus to the bad side of town. No bloodletting scene occurs. These are all lies put forth by individuals who are trying to disparage the works of Crowley. I will leave this as the final word on this matter.

of circulation. There are a lot of stories about what happened after, but what is generally agreed upon is that Crowley never intended this to be his final work.

In 1992, Crowley began pre-production on his next project, a horror film he was making for Paramount which was given the production title *Rest*. Many argue over what this title was meant to mean because it was never completed. Owing to the infamy of his most recent work, Crowley became a hot commodity, this new production getting him plenty of interviews. However, it was the Argyle interview that became synonymous with this period of Crowley's career. This interview was meant to be the ultimate exposure of Crowley's character. Stephanie Argyle, a famously tough interviewer, always got to the heart of her subject: if the subject was pure, they would become more famous than ever before. Otherwise, well, she was responsible for the eventual imprisonment of Jonathan Carruthers after all. Crowley was a nervous individual and it showed in his interview. After going through his career up until that point, Argyle began to dive into *Different Folks*. This is where the interview began to go off the rails. At first, Crowley tried to give generic answers and change the subject, but it was obvious that Argyle had wanted this interview specifically because of this film. I have reproduced here some particularly interesting excerpts from the interview. First, Argyle attempted to get to the root of why Crowley had even made the film.

ARGYLE: So, after *Mugger* unfortunately, I guess I'll say it, flopped at the box office and with the critics.

CROWLEY: It did not flop. With all due respect, the right people saw it. It didn't, flop, no, not a flop.

ARGYLE: Okay, but it wasn't as big as you wanted it to be, I'm sure. So, why a comedy right after such a powerful film?

CROWLEY: Comedies are powerful.

After a bit of back and forth, obviously meant to change the subject, Argyle began to push for an answer.

ARGYLE: Look, I'm a fan of *Different Folks*. That scene where the old man gets crushed by the car was masterful. It seemed to come out of nowhere, but it was very well done. But it's just so inconsequential when compared to.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The transcript of the original interview has an additional bit of information written in with a pen, as this part did not appear on television. The note reads: "Crowley grimaces as Argyle talks. I noted this because I thought he was being an asshole, but he seemed to be in pain



CROWLEY: That didn't happen. Why do people keep insisting that I don't know what I made?

ARGYLE: Charlie, I'm sorry if I've hurt you, it was not my intention, but what are you talking about? I've seen the movie.

CROWLEY: I made the movie.

It is difficult to get a sense from the transcript, but Crowley appeared truly distraught here, screaming most of the preceding lines. A visible cut occurs here before the interview continues with questions about his current production.

I would however be remiss if I do not mention the other infamous part of the interview. Argyle asks Crowley about the actors.

ARGYLE: So, you are well known for giving jobs to non-professional actors. The young woman in *Moon Hunts at Night* was a friend of yours I believe?

CROWLEY: That's right.

ARGYLE: The children in *Sand Games* were your nephew's friends, the young man in *Napoleon* was I believe a total stranger. And then, after working with professionals on a few works, you suddenly bring in these fascinating actors for *Different Folks*. Where did you find them?

CROWLEY: They were what was necessary for the film.

There is a moment's silence, in which Argyle seems to realize that Crowley is once again trying to get out of answering the question.

ARGYLE: Well, that is true, a great actor is always necessary, but these people seem to have come out of the ether.

Crowley's discomfort is visible on camera here, as if he has just been found out.

CROWLEY: What do you mean? What are you trying to insinuate?

ARGYLE: I'm just saying, these performances are fantastically weird and comedic and almost...inhuman. I'm sure your direction had a lot to do with that, but the performances should also be commended.

CROWLEY: Absolutely. I often look for muses in strange places. Sometimes, that muse is a famous person, sometimes it's a friend or a stranger. And

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listening to what turns out to be Argyle speaking nonsense. I saw the movie and this scene really wasn't in it."

sometimes, that muse needs to come from within, sometimes one's own evils need to be incarnated, metastasized until they are simply new entities.

This line was often repeated by Crowley's biggest admirers after this interview, a belief that he was speaking metaphorically, of creativity as a sort of cancer. I truly believe he was not speaking metaphorically. These characters seemingly killed him.

In 1993, Paramount admitted that *Rest* was all but dead. Crowley had stopped showing up to work soon after the Argyle interview. This was unusual, as it was generally accepted that the interview had been a success. It had shown him as a figure with a fiery personality; many believed *Rest* would be his introduction into the mainstream. Crowley continued to live in New York City, occasionally appearing in photos with fans, but he never produced another creative work. By 1995, his appearance began to give away his health issues. On the 20<sup>th</sup> of April in 1999, Crowley was found dead in his New York City apartment at the age of 49. It was believed that he had likely been dead for some time. His death did not make the news, nor did the cause. Due to his age and state, many assumed it was a drug overdose, suicide, cancer or AIDS, but none of these ended up being the cause. Instead, it was determined that Crowley had starved to death. His fridge was found full of rotting food, making his death even more mysterious. After a menial investigation, the NYPD determined that there was no foul play and closed the case. Crowley was cremated and his ashes were spread among some of his closest friends and relatives.

And yet, that is not where this story ends. It is often said that the Velvet Underground did not sell many albums, but everyone who bought one started a band. Something similar can be said of Crowley. Even though his career never quite took off, he went on to inspire many filmmakers, whether experimental, arthouse or mainstream. Elizabeth Dupree, a friend of Crowley whom I interviewed for this piece, stated that Crowley had once said, towards the end of his life, that he wishes he could have taken all of his work out of circulation. Thankfully, he could not. His works began to leave the academic spaces and reach a mainstream audience. This began with a Criterion release of *Mugger*. The release, approved by yours truly, led to the re-release of the rest of Crowley's oeuvre. However, what always remained a holy grail was *Different Folks*. Fans have been clamouring for this release for years. However, the issue is not rights. The issue is that no one seems to have a copy of it. Even my copy went missing over the years. At least, that was the issue. On the 20<sup>th</sup> of July, 2012, a newly created YouTube account uploaded the film,

introducing a new audience to it for the first time in decades. It was quickly taken down, but as the old adage says, once something is on the internet, it is there forever.

Since this upload, *Different Folks* has reached a larger audience than it ever did previously. Even though there is a strong, concentrated effort to remove it, the film continues to appear on streaming and torrenting sites. This reintroduction has had another effect. The actors of *Different Folks*, those people who fascinated so many, have begun to appear in other films. They are often simply background characters, the actors seeming to have not aged a day since *Different Folks*. They seem to seek out the works of Crowley's acolytes. Many of these filmmakers have admitted to me that they are ecstatic about this, but that they were not aware that these actors were even on their sets. Victor Holmes, that most Crowleyesque filmmaker, recently went so far as to make a statement that his most recent work would have to pull out of its Cannes premiere date, because some sequences that he had not shot had been added to it. Such a publicity stunt would have surely been appreciated by Crowley. Perhaps they can help Holmes reach the levels of fame that eluded Crowley before him.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shahbaz Khayambashi is an academic, curator, artist and educator based in Toronto. He is currently working toward a PhD at York University in the department of communications. His research is focused on the representations of death and protests in the media. His research has been published in a variety of places including Omega: The Journal of Death and Dying and Public. He has also had short narrative pieces published in Pressed Magazine and an upcoming book, and videos screened in festivals in Toronto and Winnipeg. You can find him on Instagram as @sha.kha

## BUILD A DESOLATION

GIOVANNI RUFFINI

*Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 2093*

The emperor's men sat at their screens in silence, pouring through the past, running test after test, checking one timeline after another. The emperor himself had taken lately to joining them in the basement of the *ghebbi*, watching the whirling sine-waves that passed for the output of each test. "There," he hissed, pointing at one of the displays hovering over their heads. "That one?"

A quick glance, a shake of the head. "No, *janhoy*. See there?" A finger pointing further down the sine-wave. "He still dies. Two days later, maybe three. Same as the others."

The emperor shook his head, shoulders slumped.

A tall, lean man just behind him bent down and whispered, "Your Majesty, it's time."

"Time?"

"The council meeting. The khalif's armies have crossed the Wadi Bisha. The counter-attack has begun."

The emperor nodded, not moving. "Tell them I will be there shortly."

The aide vanished without a word. The emperor stayed, opening a screen of his own. *The council can wait*, he thought. A red beam scanned his eye and knew him at once. Would know his sons, his daughter. Would know every one of his family without needing a name or wrist-port. His grandmother's cousin had buried it so deeply in the corporate code it had survived three mergers and the return from exile without anyone outside of the family finding it. A few more taps in the air, and he had access to all of the timelines his team had scanned that morning, all of them split in two: one screen sending input to the early months of 1974, the other receiving output from September, October, November that year.

Jam the comm cables at Kagnew Station? The government falls, the massacre still happens.

Kill the power at the Fourth Army Division's base? The government falls, the massacre still happens.

Ground the planes at Bishoftu Air Force Base? The government falls, the massacre still happens.

A rainbow of screens shimmered open, floating in the air in front of him, before he waved them all away with a curse. *We need another way back.*

*Aksum, Ethiopia*

Walatta-Negus pulled off her cap, wiped sweat from her forehead, rubbed her right eye. She had fought this for years, and lost. *They'll see I'm right, she'd thought, but it will be too late.* She begged the university to turn down the emperor's money, swore she could do it better on her own. *You want this Shoan emperor digging up our legacy? Putting it on display in his capital? Find someone else to do the digging.*

She had offered to find other funding, apply for grants overseas, do anything she could to keep her department in charge of the excavations. It didn't matter. Three of the tallest stelae in the world, and the emperor wanted to dig underneath.

*The first one already collapsed, she had complained. The second one we had to put back together ourselves when the Italians gave it back. The third one's been leaning for a century. You want to go digging around down there, something's going to come down.*

The chancellor of the university herself had come down to look at the dig site, twist her arm.

"Please, Chancellor Miriam," she had said. "Give me more time. The Voltai scan will give us a nearly perfect image of everything under King Ezana's stela. There is no need to dig."

"We don't want an image, professor. We want the real thing," the chancellor said, pointing at the hill underneath the stela. The stone slab soared nearly seventy feet in the air, towering over a field of smaller stone columns in all directions. "The emperor wants to build a guest-house and a museum complex at the base of the stela. Revenue from ticket sales in a fifty-fifty split with the university. Think of all of the projects we could fund with that money."

"If we go digging under that tower, we might bring the whole field down. All of these stelae, the big ones and the small ones, done."

“You know the story of King Ezana, Professor?” The chancellor had a strange smirk on her face.

*Better than you*, Walatta thought to herself. “What?”

“He put Ethiopia on the world stage, Walatta. He conquered Nubia. He sent our armies into Arabia.”

“I know the history,” she whispered, looking at the stelae fields.

“We are only now returning to where his armies stood. We are on the verge of becoming a world power once again, Professor.” She was reciting the line almost from memory, the Moa party platform, not quite word for word. “For the first time in 1500 years. You can be a part of that story.”

Walatta turned and stared at the tree line in the distance, remembered the last time someone had told her something like that. Fifteen years now since the Tigrayan wing of the royal family took to the bush, twelve years since Ras Sahle’s armies stormed Tigray, ten since his nano-bugs had eaten the last Tigrayan royalty alive from the inside out. His brother had gone with them, fought at Adigrat, somehow survived the massacre in the retreat from Ambeset. “We could use a leader like you,” he had told her. “Tigray will rule the empire again. You can be a part of that story.” She had chuckled at him, blushed and looked away. Never saw him alive again.

Shaking herself back to the present, Walatta turned to the chancellor. “The scans show us the foundation underneath, but don’t tell us how strong it is. You want me to do a lateral dig through the dirt supporting the foundation? If we weaken it, if something goes wrong, it will be failure bigger than we can imagine.”

“We are spending the emperor’s money. We have the emperor’s architect. We can build whatever support we need.”

“I wouldn’t even know where to start,” Walatta protested, both arms up in the air.

“You’re a digger,” the chancellor hissed. “Dig!”

### *Addis Ababa, Ethiopia*

The emperor scanned the summary again, fidgeting a bit with his feet, tired of the wait.

*Anti-trust action against EverCorps imposes restructuring of company into multiple independent firms, invalidating the licensing agreement signed with negusawi dirijit in 2089. Original share-options retained by Ethiopian royal family. Full ownership of time technology transferred to dirijit in exchange for royal family relinquishing all further claims on surviving EverCorps subsidiaries. Research staff from Tekla Giyorgis's corporate offices moved to Addis Ababa, merged with dirijit nanite staff.*

He had argued for this move against half his family. He'd been right.

"Janhoy, it's ready." His aide's voice popped him back to the present.

"Show me," the emperor ordered, speaking to a young woman in *dirijit* uniform, sitting in front of the server. Above the control console, shimmering gleams floated in the air, jumping a bit before turning into a grid, then jumping again when more gleams tightened and superimposed a map of the Ethiopian coastline over the numbers and lines on the grid.

"Yes, Your Majesty. Here." Aida's fingers danced over a series of virtual touch-screens above the main console.

"How does it work?"

She looked at the map for a moment, rolling a virtual knob under her palm, and paused before answering.

"The principle is the same as Tekla's original server," she said, pointing at the machine. "Opening the link to the past follows his techniques almost step for step. Treats it as ones and zeros. Look here: in and out, forward, back. But there is one crucial change."

She fidgeted with the controls as she spoke, the grid changing size and scale, the coastline zooming in and back out.

"Hapte-Mariam called it a 3D time printer," the emperor said, pointing at the team leader on the other side of the server room, making it almost a question.

Aida smirked. When she shook her head, the emperor did not see.

"Tekla was concerned about proof," she continued. "His work was purely digital. Connect to a computer in the past, leave a trace that survives to the present. It was proof we'd connected to the past. But we don't have to stop there. If we can toggle an electron in a circuit, we can toggle almost anything, almost anywhere."

"We can build. In the past."



Aida nodded. "One atom at a time."

"Show me," he said, pointing at the screen.

Aida zoomed in on the beach, the grid breaking and reforming three times, four, five, until the coastline vanished and the floating lights erased the map and drew ripples in the sand. And she zoomed in again, the gleams shuddering open, drawing grains of sand.

"Where are we?"

"The beaches near Zula, *janhoy*. Timeline at the top. We build a model here," she said, pointing to a picture of something that looked like a boulder, pivoting on one axis, then another, in a constant spin. "Then when the build is done, drag and drop. There."

Aida waved her arm from one screen to another. The boulder quivered, got smaller, vanished from the screen.

"What was it? What happened?"

"A grain of sand on a beach, *janhoy*." Aida smiled at him. "Two thousand years ago."

### *Aksum*

Walatta took another look over the stela field, trying to keep track of all the moving parts. A large dump mound crowded some of the smaller stelae at the edge of the field, one of the stones nearly buried. She had let the contractor put construction equipment near the Mai Shum, a pile of steel beams blocking her view of the lake itself. A gaping mouth cut under Ezana's Stela, a hole where ground should be, the first wave of steel beams holding up dirt walls around a ramp heading underground.

*Two more days*, she thought. *Two more days*.

From behind her and down the hill, she could hear a high-pitched voice bouncing up the path. Turning, she let out a quiet curse. A little blonde man, a yellow scarf flowing along behind him, walked up to her, smiling, panting for breath.

"Doctor Negus, I presume?" he grinned, putting out a hand.

"Walatta-Negus, yes. Professor." She ignored his hand, eyeing the camera crew coming up the hill behind him. "You must be the movie man," she said, crossing her arms.

“That does sound nice, doesn’t it? Movie man.” He smiled at her, shaking his hand a bit and pulling it back. “Arbury Poincelot, *Little Green Men.*”

“Sorry?”

“The show. That’s the name of my show. They did tell you, didn’t they?”

A cloud of his cameras came up to them, hovering all around, each one of the crew piloting a pair at once. One got six inches from Walatta’s face, pre-programmed to pull back and weave a bit when she swatted at it.

“They said you were investigating Africa’s greatest monuments,” she said to him, one eye still on the hover-cam, poised to come back at her.

“Why yes, ma’am, I am,” his voice growing mock-mysterious. “For signs of alien activity.”

This time, her curse was more clear.

### *Addis Ababa*

Back in the *ghebbi* basement, the emperor and Aida stood side by side, each with an open holo-screen above them. One showed the blank build space and the software for the printing platform. The other showed the stelae fields of Aksum in real time, the buzz of a tourist crowd watching the archaeological dig in progress on one part of the site. Kebede, another member of the *dirijit* team, sat in front of them, watching a build in progress on his own screen, scanning time-line displays, looking for changes as the build went further.

“The *dirijit* has invested quite a bit into their work,” the emperor told Aida, pointing at the live feed. “If she’s right about what they’ll find.” Aida looked at him, waiting for the rest of the sentence.

“Kebede,” he continued, forgetting about her. “Scroll it back a bit. I want to see what she’s going to find, maybe leave something in the tomb, some sort of sign.”

“Sign, Your Majesty?” He looked up from his screen

“Proof that it was him, that it was Ezana’s tomb.”

“But, I don’t understand.” Kebede looked to Aida, who had backed away from her screen

“An inscription, a commemoration. In Ge’ez.” The emperor was smiling, a glow in his eyes.

“I’m sorry, I. I. I don’t read Ge’ez.” Kebede looked back at his screen, trying to break the emperor’s gaze.

“I know someone. The software. It can do it? Print text?”

“Yes, but.” The emperor stared down at him, motionless, eyes unblinking. “Yes. I. We. We’ll just need the right font.”

“Fine. I’ll get you files by tonight.”

Finally, Aida broke her silence. “Your Majesty, are you sure—”

Waving at the squiggling curves mapping each timeline, the emperor cut her off. “Have we noticed any variance? On any of them?”

“*Janhoy*, these are all small builds. With something larger, we can’t guarantee the same results.”

### *Aksum*

The Minister of Culture loomed a full head higher than Walatta, her hair a gleaming black imitation Empress Menen afro. *Another stubborn Gondari*, Walatta thought to herself. *Probably doesn’t speak a word of Tigrinya. Or will act like she can’t.* She had come with two blank-faced men whose names were whispered nothings, carrying the floating holo-stands common for paperwork in every government office in the country. *Dirijit* issue, she thought.

The minister paused to pat her afro before putting out a hand and introducing herself. “Lulit Azabi.”

Walatta fussed with the fingers of her left hand, clenched behind her back. Time wasted on pleasantries.

“I’ve missed it,” Lulit said, waving at the hills and the trees in the distance.

“I’m sorry?” Walatta asked.

“My cousins are Tigrayan,” the minister smiled, switching to Tigrinya. “I used to spend summers here, even during the war.”

It should have been a ten-minute drive from campus to the dig-site, a straight shot past the market, but traffic got thick just before Arabtu Ensessa,

and they got out to walk. Resting their hands on the cars stalled nearby, they soon found the street full of people, backs turned to them, looking north towards the cathedral.

And then, they heard yelling, just around the corner, and somehow the crowd surged and Walatta and the minister found themselves pushed forward in the tide.

More shouting, back and forth, and then clearly – *faranj!* – a foreigner at the center of the mob. Walatta waved at the minister and pushed her way through the crowd, closer and closer, past the bodies packed with sweat, just to the back gate of the compound around Saint Mary of Zion. There, jammed against the stone and metal fence was the movie man, Poincelot, his forehead bloody, his arms flailing in a failing attempt to fight off the crowd. On his left, one of the camera crew struggled to stay on his feet and keep his hover-cam pointed at Poincelot.

*Little Green Men* was streaming live.

And suddenly, Poincelot disappeared, pulled to the floor under a mess of fists and kicks. Barely two seconds later, a rifle shot rang out, then another. Three men in uniform – *the local militia?* Walatta wondered – stood by the fence, one’s rifle in the air, the other two pointed at the crowd. She had to lean into the crowd to keep her balance as they turned, one by one, to push past her in the other direction.

The minister herself followed close behind, her escort quietly transformed from faceless bureaucrats into muscle-built bulldozers.

Later, when the crowd had been cleared, Walatta grabbed Poincelot’s collar, shaking him. “What were you thinking, trying to get into Saint Mary’s? You know what they keep in there. They would have killed you.”

Poincelot said nothing to Walatta, grinning with wide, staring eyes.

“The men who stopped me,” he turned to the camera floating by the fence. “They were in civilian clothing, but there can be no doubt who they are.”

Walatta looked at the minister, then back at Poincelot, puzzled.

“The Order of Abba Pakhom, the oldest chivalric order in the world,” Poincelot raved, wiping sweat from the back of his neck, still streaming live. “The men sworn to protect the Ark of the Covenant. They knew I was getting too close to the truth, and today they tried to stop me.”

The minister turned to her paper-pushers. “Get him back to his hotel. Now.”

### *Addis Ababa*

The nanite projectors fizzled a bit as each connection came online, a strange moment of static while the machines looked for a light source and decided which particles to put where, faking the face and body of each board member at the other end of the call. The *dirijit*'s board was scattered all over the world. Cairo came online first, a grim-faced Copt who took a quick moment to figure out where he was supposed to look before bowing to the emperor. Lagos next, an old woman who had been interim CEO in the first years after the restoration. When all of them had logged in, the Small Council hall in the *ghebbi* was full, a warm buzz of old friends and rivals seeing each other again after a long silence.

The emperor sat in silence at the front of the room. Several division heads came and went to give reports on their areas. Profits up on wrist-scans: data-miners continued to find new ways to track travel patterns in new populations. Profits up on the nanite reality gear: it had been *dirijit* standard since the beginning, but the models kept getting better. Profits up everywhere, except for the EverCorps acquisition.

“Its energy use for last year rivaled all other divisions combined.” The board member calling from Mumbai pointed at something no one else in the room could see. “But where’s the product? EverCorps sold – what? – time secrets to competing companies? All of the contracts are gone, canceled, and we’re not told why. The servers are in the *ghebbi* basement, and we don’t know what you’re doing with them.”

The emperor shifted in his seat, said nothing.

“Your Majesty?” Mumbai waited for an answer.

“Next year, Makonnen,” the emperor whispered. “Next year. Don’t worry. Our margins are fine.” He looked down at his fingers, scratched his palm.

“They are, Your Majesty, but there is a separate problem, the question of the relationship between your profits and the budget of the royal family. The prime minister continues to push for legislation severing the Crown fisc from the *dirijit*.”

“How does it matter what I do with the money?” the emperor asked, waving a hand in front of him. “It’s my company.”

“It is not, in fact, your company, Your Majesty.” The Nigerian woman’s voice was crisp and clear, even as the nanites struggled to keep up with her image’s quick movements. “You are merely the largest shareholder, a position you inherited on your coronation. In that capacity, you are simply a private citizen, subject to the laws of your homeland.”

“I fought a war for this. I put down a rebel prince to save my cousin’s crown. And this is what I get for it? Feisty bureaucrats?”

The Copt had been sitting quietly through the meeting, but broke the silence now. “It might be wise, Your Majesty, to focus on other matters, at least for the time being. The wars have not yet ended.”

### *Aksum*

The chancellor had told Walatta that she had to allow the camera crew’s presence on site. *Great publicity for the university*, she had said. Hadn’t told her she had scheduled Walatta for an interview the next morning.

“There are hundreds of the smaller stelae, only three of the big ones.” Walatta explained to Poincelot, an ugly bandage on his head, his cameras hovering all around. “The stela of Aksum, which the Italians stole, 24 meters. The Great Stela, which fell in antiquity, 33 meters.” She rattled off the numbers without pausing to think. “And this,” she pointed at the dig site and the tower behind it, “King Ezana’s stela, 21 meters, the last one constructed, in the fourth century AD.”

“The big one,” he pointed towards the fallen tower. “What went wrong?”

Walatta’s lips pursed, her chin tightened. “It was the largest monolith ever erected, anywhere in the world. That is not a failure.”

Poincelot only smiled in reply, a brief pause before changing topics. “Why do they call it Ezana’s stela?” he asked, moving himself to give his hover-cams a better angle.

“The stelae were burial markers, the small ones for nobility, the greater ones for kings. Our traditions tell us that King Ezana built this stela, the last one in the series. When he converted to Christianity, they did not build any more.” Walatta sounded almost sad.

“And you believe it?”

“Believe what?” Walatta asked.

“That Ezana built it.” A mischievous grin snuck into his voice. “There’s no actual evidence, is there?”

“Better than little green men.”

“Is my truth worse than yours?” Poincelot smiled at her.

Later that week, the lateral tunnel they had sloped into the hillside ran into the hard packed earth of an original ramp, dating from the construction of the site itself. They had followed the ramp into the hillside and finally hit the wall they’d been waiting for. The dig had gone more slowly than the chancellor had hoped. Walatta had insisted on stopping for even the smallest remains, taking nanite casts of every bit of organics in situ, calling in the experts for soil samples and micromorphology. She knew she was stalling, afraid to be wrong.

“When it fell, the Great Stela broke through an underground tomb buried in the downhill slope in front of it,” she told the chancellor, long before the smell of the emperor’s money had blown through Aksum. “The Nefas Mawcha.”

*The source of the winds.*

“Chittick cleared the tomb over a hundred years ago. He dug other trenches, showed there were tombs all over these fields. But the money dried up, he died, the dig stopped.”

“You think there’s another one down there, under Ezana’s stela?” The chancellor’s desk had been covered in faded print copies of old archaeological reports, unread.

“There must be,” Walatta had nodded. “No need for a stela without a tomb underneath.”

And now, here she was, face to face with a solid stone wall, a tomb on the other side. She could hear Poincelot’s hover-cams buzzing at the top of the tunnel behind her, waiting.

*What would they call it?* she found herself thinking. *Ye genzeb minch.*  
The source of our money.

Tenagne, one of her grad students, had mounted the nano-drill on a tripod pointed at the mortar joining two of the largest stones. Walatta nodded at her, swallowed, closed her eyes, felt her lips grip tight. When her brother

had fought at Ambeset, he had stayed hidden after the town fell. Recorded a sense-wave of what he heard from his hideout in an empty water tank. Scattered shots. Bodies hitting the floor. A woman screaming, for over half an hour, the sound of dull thuds. All of it came rolling over Walatta as she stood there, listening to the nano-drill punch a hole in a dead king's tomb.

It took them the better part of a day to cut through the wall and document each stone. Through the cut, a space just big enough to enter the darkness inside. Empty. No body. No grave goods. Nothing. Just a smaller stela, embedded in the far wall.

Walatta-Negus sucked air through her teeth, coughed it back out. "Look, here, under the dirt." She started brushing the stela, soft bristles working the crust embedded in the cracks. But they weren't cracks: they were clear lines and curves, cleaner now, taking shape. "An inscription," she said. "Ge'ez. Go get Wolde-Giyorgis."

When the old man arrived, he was out of breath, wiping sweat from his face. "I hope you are right," he said to Walatta. "We have not found a new one in many years."

"Please," she said, beckoning him into the tunnel her team had dug under the stela. Seeing Poincelot come back up the path, she ducked inside.

"It is quite clear, yes. There can be no doubt. Here: *Ezana walde Elle Amida*," he read, pointing to one line on the wall. "Ezana, son of Ella Amida. This is it," he said, all of them smiling.

### *Addis Ababa*

Later, when the emperor ordered his team out of the *ghebbi* basement, no one had moved. Aida had stepped back from her console, turning to Hapte-Mariam. "Don't look at him," the emperor had laughed. "It's my palace!" In the end, after the rest had been sent home, he kept Hapte-Mariam and Aida late into the night. "I want to try it myself," he had said, popping open a set of his own files on a screen floating in front of his hands. "This thing can read synapse files?"

"Of course, Your Majesty. They'll port right through. But what is the design? And when do you want to print it?"



“Here,” he answered, three hi-res images of stone stelae popping into focus in the air over the console. “The time-stamp and coordinates are embedded in the files.” And the two others stared at the images in silence.

Hapte-Mariam spoke first, unsure what to say. “They. They aren’t. They aren’t there already? In the past?”

The emperor’s eyes gleamed with smile. “No one ever thought to look, did they?”

The build took hours and strained the palace power grid. “Tell the *dirijit* this is my last build.” The emperor stayed motionless, watching the progress.

Hapte-Mariam had taken the controls, fixing the emperor’s models, tinkering around the edges. Aida stood without moving, lost in thought. Her first words brought them to a stop. “The model’s not the problem. The model’s fine. It’s the ground you’re printing it on. The geology of that hill. It’s not going to work. Ground’s too weak. Especially with the tombs underneath.”

“I thought of that, Aida,” the emperor nodded. “Remember, we already know that it works. We’ve already seen the proof.”

Aida looked puzzled, said nothing. When they started the print, she took the center chair, running the console’s roller ball back and forth around the coordinates the emperor had given them, in and out, up and down, old and new.

“Start the live feed,” he ordered. She obeyed, then stood up to give him the chair.

“Dirt,” she whispered. “We’re going to need more dirt.”

“It’s fine. We’re fine.”

“It’s not compact enough. It’s uneven. It’ll lilt.”

“Hang on. It’s almost done. Look, we’re near the top.”

The live feed was so vivid that they could almost catch the shimmers of sun off the grass on the Aksum hills, imagine the smell of cattle and wood fires in the distance. And then, suddenly, where only the short stelae had stood a moment before, three tall ones, towering over the hillside. The greatest of the three held their gaze, held their breath, held itself still for just long enough to fool them all. Then the soil underneath – soft, moist in the highland spring – gave way suddenly, and the whole tower lurched, leaned, and fell to the earth,

thirty-three meters of solid rock broken into half a dozen pieces, puncturing the entrance to the Nefas Mawcha. Seventeen hundred years ago.

For a long moment, no one said a word.

“We could always do it over again,” Aida offered. “Go back a few seconds earlier, build a better base.”

“No,” the emperor whispered, gently stroking the roller ball with his finger-tips. “Leave it. It is now as it was always meant to be.”

### *Aksum*

Walatta had the team gathered in the trailer that passed for a dig-house, more convenient than the drive back to campus. The emperor’s minister of culture, two of Walatta’s graduate students, Professor Wolde-Giyorgis, and Mesfin, the field director, cramped around a cheap fold-out table.

“We need to talk about the next steps for conservation,” Walatta opened.

Tenagne answered first. “We set up sensors in the tunnel and the tomb chamber. If there is any structural danger, we’ll know right away.”

“What about climate control?”

“No good answer there,” Tenagne said, shaking her head. “We could put a nanite seal over the hole in the wall, but if they really want to bring tourists down here,” waving her hand at the minister, “the seal won’t matter much.”

“Hard to see people paying to go down there,” Mesfin added, looking more directly at the minister. “Just the inscription. Not exactly King Tut’s tomb.”

“It’s worse than you think.” Wolde-Giyorgis sat with his hands folded, looking down at his lap. They had barely heard him speak.

The minister of culture turned her head to look at him. “How so, professor?”

“We have a problem. With the inscription.” He did not move, did not look up, kept staring at the same spot on his pant leg.

“A problem?” Walatta asked. “What problem?”

“The incisions. They’re too clean.”

“That’s because we cleaned them.” It might have been Walatta’s first smile that week.

“That’s not what I mean,” Wolde-Giyorgis answered, finally looking up, putting his hands open in the air in front of him. “Not the inscription. The letters themselves. They’re perfect. No chisel marks, no cracks, no slips. The dimensions of the letters: they’re identical, every single one. The same height. Run a laser trace on the *re*’s, the *sat*, the *kaf*, and they’re all the same. You could put one letter on top of another and not see the difference.”

“That’s impossible,” Tenagne cut in. “No stone worker could carve that well.”

“Not in antiquity, no.” The professor opened his holo and sent an image of the inscription floating into the air. A second image of close zooms on two or three sample letters. Then a third image, of his own computer screen.

“What? What do you mean?”

“I kept staring at the letters,” he said, pointing at the images floating in the air. “I knew something was wrong, but I couldn’t see it. Not until I typed them out myself, on my own screen. I did a first edition of the text.”

Everyone stared at his holo as he superimposed the inscription on the stela with the text on his computer screen.

“My letters on the screen. They matched the text perfectly. Your inscription. It’s in a modern font.”

Walatta could not remember the rest of the meeting. Blood rushed to her head. She struggled to speak through waves of sound in her ears, a pounding in her eyes. She saw the minister get up to leave, didn’t hear if she said anything on her way out. Saw Tenagne point at an open window, one of the TV crew’s hover-cams floating a foot above the trailer. Heard Mesfin yell and run for the door. Felt the plastic chair thud when she sat down, stunned.

Clarity came back maybe twenty minutes later, in the crisp, sharp sun.

Poincelot had mounted the scaffolds supporting the tunnel and stood over the entrance to the tomb, his arms spread out, Ezana’s stela looming behind his live stream. Walatta called for security, Tenagne and Mesfin running for the guards.

“Get down,” she called to Poincelot.

He nearly bounced as he spoke to the hover-cams, giddy with excitement. “Ladies and gentlemen, we finally have proof. The largest

freestanding rock monument in the world, a product of alien technology.” Nano-projected images of the fallen stela superimposed upon his face, faded out, made way for images of the two still standing “How do we know? The inscription commemorating the creator of this tower, Ethiopia’s greatest king” and here, his voice rose to a near frenzy, “cut in letters so perfect nothing in antiquity could have done it.”

A close zoom on the letters of Ezana’s inscription.

“Was it a space laser? Was it something even now we cannot understand? The same machines that cut the building blocks of the Egyptian pyramids?” And a quick cut back to his glowing blonde head. “Let’s find out!”

As Walatta waved her hand, a soldier in green combat fatigues jogged over, his right hand gripped on a rifle. “Keep him out of the site,” she said to the soldier before turning to one of the workers. “Go back to the dig-house. Get the preservation tape and the seal. I’m shutting the dig.”

Walatta turned back to Poincelot, but saw the minister watching all of this in silence, reaching for her phone. The TV crew kept filming live while more soldiers came to drag them off the site.

“Professor Walatta-Negus,” she said softly, walking forward after a brief call. “We must go at once to the airport.”

Walatta squinted at her, rubbing the back of her neck. “Your men can take you. I have to finish closing the site.”

“I must ask you to come with me. The emperor has sent for you.”

### *Addis Ababa*

The *agafari* called her name as she entered the throne room, announcing her to the court. He had served the family since before the restoration. He was pale and weak now, but his voice still filled the hall. “Professor Walatta-Negus Mengesha, University of Aksum.”

She walked slowly through the hall, struggling with something she could not quite see. The emperor’s nanites made a cloudy haze between her and the throne, one moment thick as a fog, the next veering off to the right or left to make a shape in the shadows.

Halfway down the hall, the haze cleared and the emperor came into focus, sitting on his forefathers’ throne. His nanite haze split in two, each half forming the image of a lion pacing down the hall beside her, one on the left,

one on the right. Walatta started to sweat, wondering why the throne room was so hot. When she got to the edge of the carpet, she lost sight of the lions, wondering vaguely if they had turned back to sneak up behind her. She thought about looking up, but stood motionless, staring at a strange stain on the carpet. *Nanites couldn't scrub that out?* she wondered.

The man on the throne let out a half-cough, a hard push through his mouth and nose.

"His Imperial Majesty the Emperor Sahle Selassie the First," the voice of the *agafari* called from – behind her? – all around her.

Walatta looked up at the emperor, saw him flick his fingers at the floor.

"You know who I am," she said, shaking her head. "You know my family."

"Ras Seyoum fought for us against the Italian invasion. He died for us." He smiled and spoke as if remembering an old friend who had just left the room, not something a century and a half in the past.

"Then you know why I cannot kneel."

"You will, in time." This was barely a whisper.

Aida looked at him more closely, thinking about the rumors, wondering about his age.

"Why am I here? They told me you wanted to talk about the tomb."

Sahle nodded slowly, as if lost in thought. "You cannot publish your findings. I will not allow it."

"Your Majesty, with respect," Walatta smirked, "there is no way to stop me."

"What if I showed you how I did it?"

She blinked at him, thought she saw someone moving in the shadows on the side of the room, turned to look. Saw nothing.

Several hours later, they sat on a balcony overlooking the palace gardens, sipping coffee the emperor had roasted for her himself. Images from the screens in the basement flashed through Walatta's mind: the fortress at Gondar, the monasteries at Lake Tana, the churches at Lalibela, all of them through a server showing her centuries in the past. She thought of the story of Beta Giorgis, of the miracle stories of the king, claiming he built the church in

one night with the help of angels. For a moment, she wondered whether it was true.

“You stole one of our greatest treasures from us,” putting down her coffee.

“Stole?” He smiled, calm. “I built it myself, one inch at a time.”

“But this is our country’s legacy.”

The emperor nodded, pausing for a moment before he answered.

“Does it mean less, to see it built today? It means more. We can reach now higher than ever.”

The way out of the balcony passed back through the throne room, and the long walk down the carpet. As the doors closed behind her, the lions shimmered and vanished into a mist, the mist itself swirling back into vents hidden in the floorboards in the throne room’s darkened corners. The *agafari* stepped out of a similar mist, where he had vanished at the start of the meeting, and took his place by the side of the throne.

“*Janhoy*, the others on her team know what happened.” The slight lilt in his voice made it almost a question.

“Leave them be. One more time on the machine, the proof disappears.”

“Your Majesty, the *dirijit* board was clear. We can’t finance another project like that.”

“No need. Just dirt,” he smiled. “Just a little more dirt.”

### *Aksum*

The preservation tape over the tomb entrance had been stripped away, the hologram seal in fragments on the floor. The air inside was cool, a strange breeze coming as if from all sides at once. Their eyes seemed to take too long to adjust to the darkness inside, a thin haze coming in and out of focus ahead of them.

They saw Poincelot’s feet first, facing the entrance, then the rest of him, face down in a pool of blood, a mop of blonde hair nearly stuck to the floor in sticky fragments of bone and skin.

“How’d he get in here?” Walatta snapped. “We had guards posted on the tunnel.”

Tenagne came up behind her, out of breath. “Maybe not,” she said, waving a nano-projector small enough to fit in her palm. “I found this on the floor outside, pointing at the gate. No guard. Just a projection.”

Walatta took the projector, flipped it over, found a small cultural ministry monogram on the bottom, slid it into her pocket.

Later, when the police had left and the body had been taken away, Walatta went back down. She needed to replace the tape, she had told her team. Restore the seal over the site. They knew it didn’t matter. Once the seal had been broken, nothing inside could ever be authenticated. But they had said nothing, the hush of the man’s murder over the whole hill. In the night’s cool air, she opened her glow light and let it hover just over her shoulder, casting her shadow on the wall of the tomb.

Ezana’s inscription stared back at her, dirty and worn, taunting her. *Ba-hayla egzi’a kwellu...* Walatta blinked, tugging on her nose. She reached up to adjust her glow globe, get better light on the text. She felt her fingers start to float, reaching up to the wall. Some sort of moss had started to grow in the under-strokes of the larger letters. She scratched at it with her finger nail, felt part of the stone start to crumble under the pressure.

*Wa-i-yefalles em-Takkazi yebe...*

She hissed, pulling back her hand. Then floated it forward again, running her fingertips softly over the letters, rough and uneven to her touch. The first *bet* and the second, barely alike, a full centimeter apart in size, chiseled down-strokes in one, up-strokes in the other, nothing like her memories from the week before. The whole inscription nearly completely covered in dirt. And completely different in size and shape from the one she had found last week, proof of the emperor’s print job now gone forever.

*These are our kings?* she whispered. Thought of Lalibela’s angels. Wanted so much for them to be real. *For this my fathers fought and died?*

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Giovanni Ruffini is a professor of Classical Studies in the department of history at Fairfield University. He publishes on Byzantine Egypt and Christian Nubia, and has a lifelong interest in Ethiopia, which is the subject of this story.



## DISASTER

DANIELA DELGADO

I can't see, I can't move. Why won't my eyes open? Ugh my eyes hurt. What happened? There is a weird burning smell, what's burning? Is it wood, paper? No, the smell's stronger, it burns me inside when I breathe. I think it might be some sort of chemical substance. I'm starting to open my eyes, everything's blurry. Ugh my head hurts. What happened?! I'm able to move. I turn around, there's someone on the floor, it seems to have long hair, maybe it's a girl, yeah, she is totally a girl. Who is she? I can't remember anything; I think she has a white lab coat. Everything hurts, but I'm able to slowly get myself straight. I look at myself, I'm covered in blood, full of scratches and cuts, I still don't get what happened to me. I start looking around, I think I'm in a lab, but everything is destroyed. The computers are glitching, there's lab equipment everywhere, scrapes on the walls, what happened here? How did I end up here?

#

I wake up at 5:00am like every other morning and go to the bathroom. I brush my teeth, wash my face and head back to my room. I open my window blinds and stare at the dark New York City. The only thing I see are the colorful billboards, the cars passing by; the stars starting to fade, and the sun starting to rise. I sigh thinking that today will be like just any other day, the same bullshit. After I take a shower, I wipe the foggy mirror and stare at my reflection. I look for something, a tiny bit of self-awareness, a bit of light or happiness, but nothing, just the same emotionless face. I go to my room, put on some clothe, do my hair and put on my glasses. I went to the kitchen, but I find myself just staring at my fridge, looking for something to eat knowing that I'll end up just drinking coffee.

#

Work is just the same, the security guard greeting me asking how I am, and I just answer, "trying". I go straight to my lab, I don't really like talking to people, they always ask stupid question faking they care about you but at the end they just want to know your weaknesses and judge you. I hear people ask around if I've always been like this, the truth is haven't I used to have friends, but they just used me for knowledge, took credit for the things I did, while I stood one the dark with zero recognition.

#

I've been working on the development of a drug that causes a mutation in your body that can fight any type of disease, from the simplest cold to the worst cancer possible. It's been hard to get this project approved, find the needed materials, but most importantly someone I can trust, or who can just respect my work enough to not sabotage it or take the credit from me and be my partner. One day I found my assistant, she is a lot like me, well in the part where no one accepts her or respects her, because personality wise, we are nothing alike. She is way to happy, and colorful, it sometimes irritates me, but she does the work, so I deal with it. This project might be the one that changes everything for me, I am so close to getting it done, but there is still something missing.

#

I'm working on my project, making calculation, adjustments, observations, I've tried every single substance combination I can think of, but nothing has worked out. I feel like I'm going nuts. I'm heading into a horrible mental block when suddenly my assistant speaks, I jumped surprised and ask her what she wants. Because of my tone she shyly tells me about a compound that might work. I hear her out and start making calculation, I draw possible structures, I think about every possible outcome, until I'm left with the only option of trying it out. Before trying it out I look under a microscope and see how the molecules of this compound behave, and it has a pretty good chance of working, so I decide to try it out. We start creating the mixture carefully, combining the necessary solution, now the only thing that its left is add the key command. When we added it, I had the reaction we wanted. Is this it? Was this all I was looking for? I need to do multiple tests to confirm that everything is correct.

#

I run the test multiple times and I obtain the same result. This means I'm close, close to my goal, finally, I will be known. I start running the test on lab rats. I insert the drug to a healthy rat and wait for a while to the insert the virus it needs to prevent from developing. After a few days of observation there is no change, the rat does not develop the virus. Am I finally done? I take it to my boss, but it is not enough for him. What else am I going to do? I've proven everything, done every experiment the correct way. Does he have something against me that he just doesn't want to hear me? Or is he just too

dumb to see that in-front of him is the opportunity to change the world and medicine forever? I need to do something; I need him to see.

#

I'm in my apartment, staring at my ceiling thinking what I'm going to do about all this. I need to find a solution. I think about other animal subjects, maybe changing the rat bread but nothing. I still think it's not necessary because it is all proven. The only thing left is to try it on a human but it's not that easy, it must be approved by the FDA. I felt like I was going crazy, my head would not stop so I took a sleeping pill that I created for situations like this and went to sleep.

#

I had a nightmare. I was on my lab floor and my whole body was aching. The lab was destroyed. I looked around and saw a girl on the floor and she couldn't move, I think she was my assistant, was she dead? Is this a sign that I should stop? I think it's stress and the pill together, everything will be okay. I left for my lab like every other morning but when I arrived, it's closed. There's a lot of people, news reporter, FBI, SWAT, paramedics everything. I try to get through the people and that's when I see on one of the billboards the live news reporting what happened. There I was, on the camera footage from the company going crazy on my own lab and killing my assistant. The only thing that I could think of was the dream, or I should say nightmare that I had last night. I left that place before anyone could saw me. I ditched my phone and work laptop.

#

I arrived at my apartment and start pacing around trying to remember what happened. I bang my head on the wall, drink some water, try to calm down but I can't, I need to remember what happened. I decide to go to my bathroom and get inside the shower. The water's cold, it's helping me calm down. I sit there for I while, I don't know how much time but it suddenly all comes back. I remember arriving to work and telling my assistant that I found the solution to everything, I would just use myself as an experiment subject. She said that it was a bad idea, that I shouldn't do it, but I didn't listen. I was still her boss, I told her to inject the drug, she had no other option. I remember feeling a burning sensation rushing through my veins, and suddenly I had no control of my body. It was as if I was possessed or something. I remember my assistant trying to help me calm down, but I suddenly pushed her and hit the wall and didn't wake up again.

#

I open my eyes and I'm screaming. I'm panting and all sweaty. What was that horrible nightmare? I get ready for work and leave my apartment. When I arrive there it is, the same scenario, lots of people, FBI, SWAT, paramedics, the news, and I start running away again. What is going on with me? What disaster have I caused?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniela E. Delgado Montalvo is a 20-year-old college student from the University of Puerto Rico in Mayagüez. She is currently working to get her bachelor's degree in chemistry. Since she was a kid, she had a strong passion towards writing. Most of the time her stories are based on real life experiences with a small dark twist.

## LAST MEAL

MN WIGGINS

The old woman checked her oven. “Almost ready.” She shuffled into the dining room and placed a china plate on the tablecloth. The wooden box creaked as she opened it. She withdrew a silver knife and fork, arranging them carefully on the table. Making it back into the kitchen, she placed a hand on her back as she bent down to retrieve the butter and jam from the icebox. Journeying again to the dining room, she placed these in the proper position on the table. She returned to pull the coffee off the stovetop burner, fill her blue and white porcelain cup, and ferry it by its saucer to the dining room. “I can smell those biscuits now. Isn’t it lovely? When I woke up to that smell as a little girl, I couldn’t wait to get out of bed.”

She paused to catch her breath along her well-worn path before opening the oven door. Her bifocals fogged as she withdrew the baking sheet. “Now, I don’t mean to be telling tales out of school, but these may be the best I’ve ever made.” The woman scooped the first biscuit with a spatula, her weapon of choice. A clasp of thunder sounded outside, and she nearly dumped the fresh baked goodness during its transfer to a white serving plate. The woman peered out the kitchen window and called out, “I haven’t seen clouds that dark since the day Donnie passed. Did I tell you that story? We were just kids playing in the creek out behind the house. He slipped and hit his head. By the time I fetched Momma, he was drowned. She beat me, oh did she beat me for being in that creek and for Donnie. I was only five, but I’ll feel that tanning until the day I die.” The old woman smiled, scooped the other two biscuits, and arranged them on the serving dish.

She turned off the oven, ambled into the dining room, and placed the serving dish sporting three thick, homemade biscuits. Surveying the table, she smiled again and shuffled over to the china cabinet. She pulled a pistol from the drawer and placed it to the right of her dinner fork. Pulling back her embroidered chair, she sat and carefully placed a cloth napkin in her lap. “Are you sure you won’t have anything, Preacher?”

The man shook his head.

She stabbed the first biscuit with her fork. “I made three and can’t eat more than one. It’s a shame to let the others go to waste. It’s Momma’s recipe. She may have been a lot of things, but she knew how to cook.” Getting no reply,

the old woman shrugged. "Suit yourself." She sliced the biscuit in half and watched the steam rise. Skidding her knife across the container, she watched the butter curl. "I miss the sticks of butter you used to buy. My grandmother used to churn butter as a little girl. That was a time. I remember her old privy out behind her house. I was scared to death to pee because of spiders."

Thunder roared again. "Sure is dark out there," she said, reaching for jam. "Now, I'm not trying to put on airs, Preacher, but this is the finest raspberry jam in the county. It's a shame you won't have any. I usually buy whatever's on sale, but today's special. Of course, there was a time when I had the finest of everything." She mixed jam into the butter on the top half of her biscuit in a swirl. Leaning over her plate, she took a bite and closed her eyes. "My whole life, I've eaten the top half first. My grandmother believed that said something about a body. Top halfers were go-getters, she'd say, always seeing what could be. Bottom halfers just accepted things as they were, never trying for more than they had." The old woman snickered. "A lot of folks used to say my grandmother was nuts." She sipped her coffee. "Sure you won't have some? Aren't you worried you'll hurt my feelings?"

The man shook his head.

"Well, Heavens be, what kind of preacher are you?"

The old woman finished the top half and prepared the bottom. She took a bite and said, "I have a confession. My last name isn't Westfield. It never was. I changed it to protect my boys, but they're dead now. One drank himself to death, and the other smoked until cancer took him. Never had any grandchildren. My oldest married a harlot who got pregnant by another man. She and that man died not long after. They say God works in mysterious ways, but he was clear on that one. Her cheating turned my boy to drinking, but I forgave the Jezebel long ago."

She took another bite. "Truth be told, I can't cast stones. Once upon a time, I fancied a young doctor, even though I was married. When he came calling, I buttered his biscuit. Gave me my firstborn. I never admitted that to anyone. I suppose it doesn't matter now. Feels good to unburden myself." She glanced toward the window. "The storm's passed. Might turn out to be a nice afternoon."

She reached for another. "I feel embarrassed to go for seconds with you not having any. Why don't you eat this other one? It'd make me feel better."

The man shook his head.

She sliced the biscuit open as precisely as the first, applied butter and jam in a measured fashion, and bit the top half. “My last name used to be Narsustankowski.” The old woman watched his eyes sharply, but the man’s expression didn’t change. Her eyes narrowed. “I suspect you’ve heard the name.”

The man nodded.

She bit her lower lip and took a breath. “Then you know all about my husband, Robert.”

He nodded.

“And what he did.”

The man nodded a third time.

Her hand trembled as she took another bite. “I’d ask if you plan to tell anyone, but I’m the last of my line, so I don’t care.” She pointed at him. “Tell whomever you’d like, but set the record straight if you do. Some say I was the brains behind it, some sort of Madame Bovary. Nothing was further from the truth.”

The man raised an eyebrow.

Her countenance fell. “Fine. Truth is, he would never have amounted to anything if it weren’t for me, stuck in a lab somewhere, working on piddly things. When he discovered that drug— yes, I pushed him. I told him that all the testing he wanted to do was a waste of time. And I may have questioned his manhood and ridiculed him into falsifying results to get it to market. But, Preacher, there was no way I could have known how many would die. Oh, but the money was sweet. Mercy alive, I had to have it.” Her head dipped. “And when they came for Robert, I abandoned him. Took the boys, the only thing he ever loved.” She looked away. “I knew where he was hiding when he got sick. I didn’t lift a finger—just let him die alone. Preacher, I’m sorry for what I’ve done.”

She covered her eyes. “Goodness, the sun’s come alive out there.” She sipped her coffee and took a bite of the bottom of her second biscuit. “I’m glad you dropped by on today of all days. Being new in town, I’m still unsure how you knew to visit. Are you sure we haven’t met? I can’t shake how much it feels I know you.”

The man sat motionlessly.



“You sure don’t say much for a preacher.” She finished the biscuit and reached for the last one. She sliced it and brought the bottom half to her mouth. After her bite, she said, “I don’t know why I did that. Maybe I’m feeling a little more satisfied today.” She stood, worked her way over to the window, and closed the curtains. “Have you ever known the sun to shine so brightly?” She returned to the table, finished the bottom half, and then the top. The woman tidied her mouth with her napkin. “I can’t believe I ate all three. But I tell you what, this was the best meal I can remember.”

She patted the revolver. “It’s time.” She examined his eyes. “I suspect some will judge me for this—say I took the coward’s way. When they learn who I was, some’ll say good riddance. But Preacher, you tell them I’ve had a hard life, did the best I could, and this was my choice. I stopped taking the pills a few weeks ago, and there’s nothing more the doctors can do for me. I know what’s coming and don’t particularly care to stick around for it. She shook her finger. “And don’t try to talk me out of it. I don’t want any Bible thumping about fire and brimstone.”

The man stared back blankly.

She looked at him with bewildered eyes. “Aren’t you going to try to stop me?”

He shook his head.

“Well, I declare. What kind of preacher are you?”

He shook his head again.

The old woman’s eyes widened. “You’re not the new preacher?” She rose and pointed the gun at him. “Then get the hell out of my house!” She used both hands to cock the trigger.

The figure rose and turned to the wall behind him. A door appeared. The old woman shielded her eyes from the light as he opened it. The figure extended a hand toward her. She turned and saw herself sitting in the chair, hand clutched to her chest. She put down the pistol and passed on. A white serving plate with two untouched biscuits watched her leave.

END

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MN Wiggins is an internationally published author, surgeon, voice actor, and humorist from the American South. Formerly an Associate Professor of Ophthalmology at the University of Arkansas, he currently works for the Department of Veteran Affairs training residents from the University of Florida. His recently released novel, *Physician's Guide to Homicide*, completes the Arkansas Traveler trilogy, featuring Wiggins's most well-known character, Dr. Melvin Napier.

In addition to *AcademFic*, Dr. Wiggins's short stories have been featured in *The Horror Zine*, *The Hooghly Review*, *Black Petals*, *Medicine and Meaning*, and read on the podcasts *Creepy* and *Frightening Tales*. He has forthcoming stories in *Symphonies of Imagination*, *Close to the Bone*, *Flunk* magazine, *Pawsitively Creepy*, *Once Upon a Crocodile*, *Thirteen*, and *The Night's End* podcast. Dr. Wiggins's complete works may be found at [www.MNWiggins.com](http://www.MNWiggins.com)

## THE LONG GODOT

JON WESICK

I tipped the bottle of rye whiskey over my cup of joe. One drop slid to the spout leaving a trail like a slug on a plate-glass window. It was March. The sky was gray, the grass brown, and my bank account was empty as the bottle due to the Yen's devaluation after I tracked down a Japanese assassin called "The Chipmunk." My name is Pillbottle, Morris Pillbottle and I'm a private detective. I was about to shake the bottle to coax another drop into my coffee when two guys walked into my office. Except for the bowler hats, perched like unrolled condoms on their heads, both looked as unremarkable as briefcases full of cash in the halls of Congress.

"Is this the Pillbottle Detective Agency?" the shorter one asked.

I pointed to the sign painted on the frosted glass saying, "ycnegA evitceteD elttoblliP."

"My name is Vladimir," the taller said, "and this is my friend Estragon."

"We'd like you to find Mr. Godot," Estragon said.

"Missing person, huh?" I took a sip of java. It tasted too much like coffee and not enough like whiskey. "What can you tell me about him?"

"We're supposed to meet by the willow tree," Estragon said.

"Before dark, a boy arrives and tells us Mr. Godot has been delayed and will meet us, tomorrow," Vladimir added. "We're prepared to pay you a handsome sum to find him."

"Just how handsome are we talking about?" I asked.

Vladimir emptied his pockets and put a pile of change on my desk.

"That doesn't even comb my hair," I replied.

Estragon added a handful of quarters to the pile.

"I still need to shine my shoes."

Vladimir added a bottle cap. I took the job.

\*\*\*

The willow tree didn't offer much concealment so I sat with my back against the trunk and fiddled with my cell phone. I scrolled through stories

about a homophobic cat, armadillo body painting, and plaid chewing gum. I was so caught up in reports of a border collie playing Wordle that I practically missed the boy telling Vladimir and Estragon that Mr. Godot wasn't coming.

The "boy" was a middle-aged man stuffed in a child's clothes like sheep's lungs in a haggis. His shirt sleeves reached the middle of his hairy forearms and his pants barely covered his knees. He was easy to follow because he never looked up from his cell phone. I let him get a block ahead and kept my own cell phone in my hands in case he turned around. After twenty minutes we entered the outskirts of a city. Like a lemming with a death wish, the boy stared at his phone even when crossing streets. He entered a bar with a green façade called The Paisley Chameleon. I doubted they'd card him.

I gave him a few minutes and followed. It wasn't the kind of joint attended by partiers swilling high-end vodka nor was it a sports bar. Instead, it was a quiet place for serious drinkers to forget their troubles. The furniture was dark wood and dozens of beer taps lined the bar. I sat a few seats away from the boy.

"What are you drinking?" I asked.

The boy looked up from his glass. "Gimlet."

"I'll have one of those," I told the bartender. "And another for my friend, too."

The mixture of London dry gin and lime was cool and refreshing enough that I wanted to order another. Instead, I nursed my drink and bought more for the boy.

"My name's Morris," I said.

"Terry." The boy shook my hand.

"What do you do for a living?"

"I work for a messenger service." Terry stared into his glass.

"You must meet interesting people," I said.

"Not really."

"Been doing it long?"

"Twenty-three years." He staggered to the restroom. After a few minutes he returned.

“If you don’t mind me saying, you don’t look fit to drive.” I took out my keys. “Why don’t you have another drink while I get my Hyundai?”

I called an Uber, got a lift to my car, and drove back to the bar. Terry was so wasted that he hadn’t noticed the delay. I got him into the front seat and buckled him in.

“Where do you want me to drop you?” I pulled away from the curb.

“You’ve got to help me escape this absurdist existence,” Terry said. “I’ll pay you a hundred dollars if you drive me to Canada.”

“Sure, but first you have to help me.” I turned to look at the lights of passing cars casting shadows, like the sets of a German Expressionist movie, on Terry’s face. “Who is Mr. Godot and where can I find him?”

“It’s not Godot. It’s that sadistic writer Wade Beckett. He gets inside my head and makes me do things.” Terry grabbed my forearm. “You’ve got to get me away from him.”

It took four hours to drive him to Sherbrook, Quebec. He talked about starting life over as a lumberjack or an oilfield worker in the Alberta tar sands. I dropped him at a Tim Hortons and after some Timbits and coffee, I left to find Wade Beckett.

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Beckett lived in a two-story house on the beach in Kennebunkport, Maine. I climbed the steps to the deck and knocked on the aluminum siding next to a picture window. A woman with bronzed skin and brassy hair answered. Her eyes were the color of zinc oxide, and her nipples poked through her sweatshirt like a pair of quarter-inch, socket-cap screws. She was such a knockout that doctors recommended avoiding strenuous exercise to anyone who saw her.

“Help you?”

“Names Pillbottle, Morris Pillbottle.” I handed her a business card. “I’d like to speak with Wade Beckett.”

“He’s at the Meatloaf Writer’s Conference in Riptorn, Vermont.” She looked at my card. “Private detective, huh? Maybe you can help. I’m his wife, Irene, and I suspect Wade is being held against his will. I could pay you a handsome sum to break him out of there.”

“How handsome are we talking about?” I asked.

“A hundred dollars.”

“That might comb my hair but I’d still need to dry-clean my trench coat.”

“Two hundred.”

“What about trimming my nose hairs?”

“Three hundred. You drive a hard bargain, Mr. Pillbottle.”

Like everyone else, she got that wrong. I drove a Hyundai.

\*\*\*

I got on the I-89 heading north and marveled at my good fortune. All I had to do was escort a writer away from a group of pacifist academics to earn my fee. This wasn’t just a piece of cake. It was a whole French bakery complete with enough madeleines to inspire a million-word novel. I was two hours from Riptorn, Vermont.

When I saw Meatloaf Mountain overlooking the conference center, like a 1950s housewife whose husband was hours late for dinner, I realized I’d gotten it wrong. The facility was a windowless, concrete bunker surrounded by a chain link fence topped with razor wire. Guard towers at the fence’s corners had an unobstructed field of fire into the courtyard. If I wanted to spring Beckett, I’d need an excuse to get inside. I drove to a shopping mall and returned an hour later.

“My name is Herb Drexler, here for my three-o-clock appointment,” I said into the intercom.

“I don’t have a record of any appointment.”

“This is the Meatloaf Writer’s Conference, isn’t it?” I replied. “You filled out a card saying you wanted me to clean a room to demonstrate the Lurgy vacuum cleaner.”

“Hold on. I’ll ask Dr. Lowbrow.”

The gate opened, I drove inside, and parked in front of the building. A short man with white hair and a worried brow met me at the entrance.

“Herb Drexler. Nice to meet you.” I unloaded a vacuum cleaner from the trunk and handed the attachment bag to the man. “Hold that would you? If you don’t mind me asking, what kind of vacuum cleaner to you currently have?”

“It’s some kind of upright, I think.”

“What is this place, anyway?” I looked at the guard towers as we walked toward the entrance.

“As you know, writers procrastinate,” Dr. Lowbrow said. “I designed an environment where that’s impossible. Our alumni include two National Book Award winners, three Pulitzer recipients, and one was even nominated for the Nobel Prize. It’s amazing what you can accomplish with forced isolation and electric shocks.”

“Armed guards! Really?” I pointed to the towers.

“They’re mannequins,” he whispered. “Just don’t tell the inmates, I mean guests.”

The metal detector buzzed as we carried the hardware through to entrance but Dr. Lowbrow nodded to the guard and he let us through. A low-pile, stain-resistant, polypropylene carpet in a pattern called Notorious Gaucho covered the lobby.

“Tell you what I’m going to do.” I plugged the vacuum cleaner into the outlet. “You’re my last client of the day so I’ll vacuum your entire facility. If you don’t agree that the Scramjet Turbo 3000 with our patented Nitro-Fueled Compressor and Supercharged, Magnum Filter makes your facility cleaner than a chihuahua that’s been through a carwash, the job is free. But if you like it, I can give you this little baby for just ten low, low payments of \$199.99.”

The vacuum cleaner did well on the writers’ hair, torn out in frustration, but it clogged on some papers under the couch. It took fifteen minutes to remove book two of Gogol’s *Dead Souls* that had wound around the beater-bar brush. Dr. Lowbrow got bored and left. After completing the first floor, I hauled the vacuum cleaner up the stairs. The second floor was carpeted in a pattern called Truculent Viking. I started with the hallway and knocked on a door.

“Housekeeping!” I entered to find Galway Kinnell eating oatmeal with the ghost of John Keats. “Don’t mind me.” I vacuumed rolled oats off the carpet in a pattern called Sardonic Samurai and moved to the next room, which contained a nose dressed as a Russian general and a carpet in a design called Ironic Anarchist.

It took several tries before I found Wade Beckett’s room. With a face like chiseled granite, hair the color of quartzite, and eyebrows dark as hematite, he resembled a famous director whose name was something like a

city in Texas. Archibald Abilene? Ferdinand Fort Worth? Beckett turned his chrysocolla-colored eyes toward me and asked, "What are you doing here?"

"Irene hired me to bust you out. Pretend you're my assistant and carry this vacuum cleaner past the guards."

"That just won't do," he said. "Where is the conflict? What are the stakes? If you can't answer these questions, how can our escape result in a rewarding climax that is surprising and yet natural?"

"I suppose I could use this," I removed the snub-nosed .45 I'd smuggled past the metal detector with the accessories.

"Kid, you've got grit," Beckett said. "I'm going to write you into my novel."

"I'll create a distraction. When you hear gunshots, run to the entrance. I'll have the car running and we'll beat it out of here." I propped his door open as I left.

No one bothered me when I hauled the vacuum cleaner to the break room. I unloaded my pistol, put the bullets in the microwave, selected the popcorn setting, and ran for the exit. The bullets went off when I hit the lobby. I cranked up my Hyundai and waited with the engine running until Beckett dashed into the front seat. I would have burned rubber but my car was a Hyundai after all. We cruised past the puzzled staff and onto the interstate.

\*\*\*

The cops roused me out of my bed at 5:00 AM. A detective, named Barker, with a beet-red face, nose like a kohlrabi, and body like a butternut squash did the talking.

"Get dressed. I'm taking you downtown."

"For dinner and a show?" I asked.

"Down to the station, wise guy."

"What's this about?" I slipped into my fedora.

"Double murder. Witnesses say you were the last one to see Vladimir and Estragon alive."

They hustled me into a squad car, jostled me downtown, and manhandled me into an interview room.



“P.I., huh?” Barker lit a cigar and blew acrid smoke in my face. “One word from me and city hall will pull your license faster than Snoop Dogg on his way to a bong sale. Who’s your client?”

“I’ve got nothing to say.”

“I ought to give you a knuckle sandwich.” Barker’s knuckles popped louder than the Tunguska explosion.

No amount of cheese, bacon, spicy mustard, and mayo would make that sandwich appetizing but a P.I. won’t stay in business long if he goes spilling information to the flatfoots. It looked like I was in for a dental appointment, the bad kind, when a familiar detective walked through the door.

“Lieutenant Filefolder.” Barker backed away from the table. “I was just asking the witness to help with our investigation.”

“Go find a fire hydrant and piss off, Barker.” Filefolder sat across from me. “You’re in over your head this time, Pillbottle. Ordinarily, the death of two people experiencing homelessness wouldn’t raise a stink but Vladimir and Estragon are part of the longest-running gag in literature and the D.A. is out for blood. Your only chance is to tell me everything.”

“I’ve got nothing to say.”

“Take him away, boys.”

“What’s the charge.” I stood while the uniforms wrapped bracelets around my wrists, not the charmed kind but the steel bracelets that bit like a meth-addled pit bull having a bad day.

“No charge,” Filefolder said. “I’m placing you in protective custody.”

\*\*\*

The cell was bare except for a sink, seatless toilet, and a mattress thin as the shaved truffles at Chez Pierre.

“Hey!” I yelled. “I want a lawyer.”

A bull, named Lucky, took me to a payphone. He had a wooden leg and a glass eye. If Frankenstein’s monster and ALF had a lovechild, it wouldn’t be half as ungainly as the guard. There was no phone book so I dialed a number scribbled on the wall.

“Godot, Potso, and Christmas. How may I help you?”

“I’m in city lockup. I need a lawyer.” I gave the secretary my details.

“Mr. Godot will surely be there by the end of the day,” she said.

Lucky, took me back to my cell. Three hours later he returned and said, “You have a visitor.”

A row of chairs behind reinforced glass lined the inmates’ side of the visitors’ room. I took a seat across from Terry and picked up the phone.

“I thought you were in Quebec,” I said.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.” Terry scratched his beard. “I came to tell you that Mr. Godot can’t make it, today, but he’ll surely be here, tomorrow.”

\*\*\*

There was nothing to do in my cell but count the hairs on my forearm. When I got to ninety-seven thousand thirty-nine, I heard a voice coming from near the sink.

“Hey buddy, over here.”

“Who’s there?” I didn’t see anyone.

“Down here.”

I looked under the sink and saw a cockroach in a red vest and knee-length boots on each of his six legs.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“This is the only place where people have time for intelligent conversation.” He twisted his antennae into a mobius strip. “The only guy on the outside who wanted to chat was Kafka. After he wrote that scandalous story about me, I wanted to sue but no lawyer would take the case. How about you?”

“I’m waiting for Godot,” I said.

“Say, you wouldn’t have any of that wine brewed in a toilet bowl. Would you?” the cockroach said. “I could sure use a drink.”

“Sorry.”

“So, what do the cops have on you?”

“You wouldn’t be a jailhouse snitch, would you?” I took off my shoe and the cockroach scurried through a crack in the wall.

“Let me out of here!” I screamed and rattled the bars.

Lucky appeared with a gleam in his eye like a young Torquemada's on seeing his first pair of nipple clips.

"You can't leave yet."

"Why not?" I asked.

"You have to wait for Godot."

"Oh, yeah."

\*\*\*

The cops kicked me loose after three days. Although their appetite for bullying was unbounded their patience with absurdist literature had its limits. When I got back to my office, the phone rang. It was Irene.

"Mr. Pillbottle, I'd like you to look after my husband. You got along well and I could pay you a handsome fee for your time."

"Cut the mortadella, sister. I've got a face like a waffle iron and a gut like the Goodyear blimp. No amount of money could make this tired gumshoe handsome."

"How does a thousand dollars a day sound?"

"I'm on my way."

\*\*\*

She greeted me at the door, wearing a tight dress the color of anthracite.

"Wade's resting after a hard night with the thesaurus. Why don't you get settled?" She gestured to the servant. "Nonpareil will show you to your room."

Nonpareil took my bag. He had a complexion the shade of baked Brie, hair the color of bouillabaisse, and eyes like tiny escargots. When we got to the top of the stairs, he pulled an eight-inch fondu fork made of molybdenum/vanadium steel and held it to my neck.

"If you hurt him, I will keel you!"

"Keel as in the bottom of a boat?"

"No, keel as in murder."

"Do you mean mule deer?"

“What’s going on out there?” Wade Beckett stuck his head out of his study.

“Oh, I was just showing Mr. Pillbottle to his room.” Nonpareil hid the fork behind his back.

“Well, keep it quiet,” Beckett said. “I’m trying to get some work done.”

\*\*\*

I joined Beckett in his study a few hours later.

“Care for a gimlet?” Beckett poured equal part Tanqueray gin and Rose’s lime juice into two glasses and passed me one. “I’m stuck on my novel *Schrodinger’s Litterbox* and need your help. You’re a man of action so I figured we could bounce around some ideas.”

“I can tell from the title that your novel touches on the collapse of the wave function, that puzzling feature of quantum mechanics that’s confounded physicists for a century.” I sipped my drink. Too much lime. “Of course, the cheap shot would be to write about parallel universes but the many-worlds interpretation has been overused. The Copenhagen view is referred to as, ‘Shut up and calculate.’ Where/s the fun in that?” I stroked my chin. “Maybe a hidden-variable theory like Bohmian mechanics would be the way to go.”

Beckett stared.

“But you’d have to get around the fact that Alain Aspect’s measurement of Bell’s Inequalities disproved hidden-variable theories, at least local ones. Hmm, a novel featuring nonlocality would be fascinating.”

“Let’s go to dinner. Shall we?” Beckett picked up the gin bottle.

I followed him downstairs to the dining room. Irene was already at the table. Her lipstick was red as molten aluminum at 1220 degrees Fahrenheit and her perfume had the heady aroma of a Bessemer converter. Beckett sat opposite her and I sat somewhere in the middle.

“Nonpareil has prepared a special treat for us.” Irene tapped her teaspoon against a champagne flute to summon the servant.

Beckett poured a healthy slug of gin into his glass. The terror of a Siberian husky on the way to the dog groomers replaced the look of boredom on his face when Nonpareil placed a bed of rice and vertical broccoli florets on the table.

“Madam et messieurs, let me present the Enchanted Broccoli Forrest.” He topped the dish with brandy and lit it on fire. “*En flambé!*”

Beckett recoiled from the table, flung the sliding door open, and ran down the beach.

“Save him!” Irene yelled. The ancients believed a wandering uterus caused hysteria. If that was true, Irene’s was sending postcards from Uzbekistan.

I followed the footprints in the sand but they ended at the waterline. Nonpareil was right behind me.

“You go south.” I pointed. “And I’ll go north.”

I ran up the beach, dodging frigate birds and Portuguese man o’ war. Two hippies were up ahead.

“You see a man run by? Looks a little like the director of *The Maltese Falcon*.” When they looked puzzled, I added. “Has a name like a city in Texas.”

“Stone Cold Steve Austin?” asked the guy with blond dreadlocks and a patchy beard.

“No, Austin is the wrestler.”

“Bernie El Paso?” the woman with stringy hair suggested.

“Alfredo San Antonio?” the guy offered.

“Debbie Does Dallas?” the woman asked

“Sam Brownville? Larry Laredo? Penelope Plano?” We played the guessing game until the guy said, “We haven’t seen anyone come this way.”

“Down here!” Nonpareil yelled.

I ran south and found Nonpareil holding a soggy Beckett in his arms. We carried him to the house and put him to bed.

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A vulture took to the air as I approached the burnt, willow tree. All that remained was ash, the smell of propane, and two charred bowler hats. I’d come looking for Terry in hopes he could provide some background on Beckett’s meltdown but he wasn’t here. I decided to try the law firm that employed him as a messenger.

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I sat at a table by the window with a good view of the high-rise that housed Godot, Potso, and Christmas. A laptop computer and supercharged-turbo latte helped me blend in with the coffee shop's clientele. Even after three refills and twenty-two trips to the bathroom, Terry never showed. I crossed the street and entered the lobby. The placard by the revolving door said the law firm was located in suite 508. The button for the fifth floor in the elevator didn't work so I selected six. I got off, passed smash rooms, chicken rentals, and plant hotels, before taking the stairs down a flight and finding myself on the fourth floor. I climbed the stairs up a flight and was back on six. I man carrying a theodolite got in the elevator with me. We took it down to three, climbed two flights of stairs, and ended up back on six. No matter how many combinations of stairwells and elevators we tried, we couldn't make it to the fifth floor. When I returned to the coffee shop, it was closed.

\*\*\*

A librarian greeted me at the circulation desk. She resembled that actress married to a playwright, a woman with the surname of a bird. Rita Dove? No, that was a poet. Laurie Partridge? Rebecca Albatross? Whatever her name, she wore the ponytail, poodle skirt, and horn-rimmed glasses that could make a guy in a fedora fall hard.

"What's your name, sweetheart?"

"It's Paige, Paige Turner."

"Have anything by Wade Beckett?" I asked.

"Aisle fourteen." She leaned forward and my eyes plunged into her cleavage like the bathyscape Trieste diving into the Marianas Trench.

My gaze surfaced slowly to keep the nitrogen bubbles from expanding in my bloodstream thus avoiding the bends. I passed the microfiche and computers on my way to the fiction section. I turned right into aisle fourteen and found man in a chalk-striped suit blocking my way. He looked like that actor who played a heavy in gangster films and had a name like a boat. George Dinghy? Walter Dugout? Derrick Cabin Cruiser? Before I could decide, someone pinned my arms behind my back.

"You're messing with things that are better left alone." He sunk a fist into my gut. I doubled over and fell to the carpet covered in a pattern called Intoxicated Spartan. "The Parents' Council for Decency says this section is off limits. Let's get out of here, Rocco." The thug left a kick to the teeth as a parting gift.

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“Are you all right, sir?”

I opened my eyes and saw the angel from the circulation desk leaning over me. Her breath smelled of laundry dried in Colorado sunshine.

“Thugs from the Parents’ Council sucker punched me.” I touched my handkerchief to my lip and it came away stained with blood.

“Want me to call the police?”

“No, they won’t do anything.”

“Here.” Paige Turner sorted through the brass knuckles, tampons, .357 magnum, and eye liner in her purse before removing a canister of pepper spray and handing it to me. “Give them a blast in the eyes next time.”

“Thanks, angel.” I struggled to my feet.

On my way past the literary criticism section, I saw a book cover that made the whole sinister plot fall into place. I dashed to my Hyundai, got on I-89, and tried to call Irene but the thug from the Parents’ Council had busted my cell phone. I drove like a mad man, took the Kennebunkport Highway exit, turned right on Kennebunkport Drive, took a left on Kennebunkport Boulevard, followed it until it turned into Kennebunkport Street narrowly avoiding a wrong turn onto Kennebunkport Court, and pulled into the Beckett’s driveway.

Irene dropped her glass of Bad Dog Ranch Chardonnay when I burst into the room. A leg of lamb lay on a tray in the middle of the table along with tiny potatoes and asparagus in Hollandaise sauce.

“Wade!” I yelled. “Where is he?”

“Upstairs in his study.”

My feet hammered the stairs harder than Christian Grey pounded Anastasia Steele in chapter ten of *Fifty Shades*. I found Beckett passed out in his study, an empty bottle of pills beside his laptop.

“Call an ambulance!” I yelled.

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The EMTs rolled the stretcher out the door and loaded Wade into the back of the ambulance. Flashing, blue lights swept across Irene’s face. Her

brow wrinkled in worry and she held her pearl necklace to her mouth. I followed her back inside.

“Thank God, he’s all right,” Nonpareil said. “If you’ll excuse me, madam, I’ll get the car so we can follow him to the hospital.”

“Not so fast, Nonpareil,” I said, “or should I say Roland Clouseau?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Nonpareil’s eyes darted to the dining-room table.

“I saw your picture in the literary criticism section of the library,” I continued. “You’re one of those French Deconstructionists who advocate the death of the author. Only in your case, you mean in literally. Like all critics, you failed as a writer so you decided to take Wade down to sooth your ego. Each night, you substituted your writing for Wade’s, leading him to believe he’d lost his voice. When you learned two of his characters hired a detective, you figured the gig was up so you burned them alive, a fitting irony from someone who’s been gaslighting Wade for all these years.”

“You’ll never take me alive!” Nonpareil threw the leg of lamb.

I ducked and it struck the wall creating an abstract expressionist pattern of mint jelly and gravy. Nonpareil ran up the stairs.

“Stop him before he writes his escape!” Irene yelled.

I took the stairs, two at a time, and burst into Wade’s study as Nonpareil typed on the laptop. I reached for my snub-nosed .45 but he had already written it out of the story.

“Here’s some writing advice” I blasted him in the eyes with pepper spray. “You need to spice up your action scenes.”

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“Got to hand it to you, Pillbottle. I never would have solved this case without your help.” Lieutenant Filefolder turned to the others. “Book him, Steve-O.”

A uniformed officer with a penchant for insane stunts led Nonpareil away.

“What will happen to Wade Beckett?” I asked.

“He’ll be all right. He may be a great writer but he’s a lousy pharmacologist. He mistook Viagra for tranquilizers so his wife will remain at



his bedside until the swelling goes down.” Filefolder put on his fedora. “Want to join me for a lobster donut?”

“Some other time,” I said. “I’m heading to the library. There’s a Paige Turner I want to check out.”

END

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jon Wesick earned a Ph.D. in experimental nuclear physics from the University of Maryland in 1983. He is a regional editor of the *San Diego Poetry Annual*. He's published hundreds of poems and stories in journals such as the *Atlanta Review*, *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *I-70 Review*, *Lowestoft Chronicle*, *New Verse News*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *Pearl*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *Slipstream*, *Space and Time*, and *Underside Stories*. His most recent books are *The Shaman in the Library* and *The Prague Deception*.

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# MUERTO PARAO

TAYLOR HAGOOD

—WITH THANKS TO HUSSEIN EL-ALI

2017

## Lake Worth, Florida

I want so much to be able to claim being a part of his life, belonging to him, his belonging to me. But he was just my student, and I am just a gringo he slept with. Once. And probably the last woman he slept with. But even that I don't know for sure.

My legs wobble a little as I walk into the funeral home. Not because my heels are high—I've always struggled with stilettos, but I haven't had feeling in my legs for a week. No feeling anywhere except for a pummeled sensation.

I'm the only gringo here. Over the past two months I have imagined the moment of meeting Jesus's family and friends with a torturous blend of eagerness and fear. If it were ever going to happen it would obviously be awkward, and potentially disastrous—an end right at the beginning. But at least I imagined there would be hope of something beyond. Instead, today there is only an end to almost nothing.

I don't see a coffin anywhere, and the people in the room do not seem especially sad. Have I come to the wrong place?

I see Jesus, standing in the corner. He's wearing a shiny outfit, a flat-billed cap, and sunglasses.

1859

## *Windsor Plantation, Mississippi*

*I shudder when I put my hand on Christina's shoulder.*

*"Abigail!"*

*"I'm sorry, mother."*

*"Be nice to your sister."*

*But this isn't my sister. Christina hasn't been here for three days. The smell of powder and roses trying to cover up the stench of the chemicals hits me so oversweet I feel I must vomit.*

*Meanwhile, my legs hurt from standing here so long. I'm actually a little jealous of Christina, which is an awful thing to say. She's propped up by an iron stand Mr. Lubitz has devised.*

*Mr. Lubitz bends over the camera, his face inclining into shadow, light lavng his forehead in the pose of a Caravaggio painting. His hairline recedes, but where it grows it glistens dark and wiry. Father believes him to be the best photographer in Natchez, and he even sent our nice Sunday carriage to bring him and his equipment over. Mr. Lubitz stayed last night and will again tonight. He and Father talked through the evening about the Hebrew language, which interests Father greatly. He doesn't know the language well, but Grandfather is a Hebrew scholar and one of the founding faculty at Bethany College in Virginia.*

*I can't imagine what Mr. Lubitz must think about being here, with this slave-holding Gentile talking to him about Hebrew. I notice Mr. Lubitz's face souring whenever Mammy, Annie, or Julius wait on Mother or me. Tensions are running so high in this country.*

## 2017

I feel my knees buckling, and I have to brace myself against the wall.

"Hello, Miss," an older woman says.

"Hello," I say, my voice breaking.

"Are you here for Jesus?"

"Y-yes."

"And you are?"

"Meagan Cobb. I teach at Palm Beach State. Jesus was . . . a student of mine."

"Oh," she says with a special smile for a teacher—a smile that comes with the confidence of now understanding the relation of things. She takes me by the hand. "Come over here. I'm his aunt. You need to meet his parents and sisters."

Jesus's family is standing around him talking to people. His aunt speaks to them in Spanish, still holding my hand. It is the kind of moment I have imagined, and it should be sweet.

"They want to know what do you teach?" Jesus's aunt asks.

"Art."

She tells them in Spanish and they nod, but I see no recognition or interest in their eyes, and I realize he hasn't told them about me. There's no reason he should have. Nothing even to tell, and I know that. But it hurts me deeply.

All the while I'm trying not to look at his face, which is so still. I know the cap covers up where a bullet shattered the back of his skull and that there are five more holes in his body. I immediately envision his chest and abdomen pristine and smooth, the gold chain he wore against his skin, remembering the way it felt under my fingertips. Then I envision his body with bloody, torn wounds.

Suddenly I feel hot embarrassment, looking around at all the Latinas here. Everything about them oozes sensuality. Who knows how many of these girls he slept with, and for all I know one of these "sisters" might actually be his girlfriend. I know a good-looking twenty-two-year old man with all these girls available didn't need somebody like me, a forty-something, out-of-shape art teacher. There's always an erotic dimension to a classroom, and maybe that gave him some kind of small thrill. But who am I kidding? His world is—was—flashy, fast, sizzling, dangerous. I'm just a woman who likes to stay home and draw.

Everybody in my family for generations has gone to the University of Mississippi (I refuse to call it Ole Miss) because they were rich aristocrats, originally slave-holders from Natchez, although I grew up in Canton. They went to footballs games and waved Confederate flags and drank. I didn't want any of that. I went to the University of Southern Mississippi because it has a strong art program. Then I escaped Mississippi and went to the University of Florida where I got my MFA. And then I got out of the South altogether ironically by going south to West Palm Beach. I've been here for ten years, and it's the kind of place I've always wanted to be, far away from all the stifling conservatism I grew up in. This state is as red as Mississippi, and my parents have listened to everything the president has to say about immigrants. But this county is a blue patch.

Even I have my lines I don't want to cross, though. I've always been the first one to condemn those awful smarmy male professors who sleep with their students. I always just assumed *those* men were predators.

I'm not so sure now. I mean, they probably are predators, but other things can happen in teacher-student trysts. Jesus wasn't the first attractive guy to enroll in one of my courses. And nothing about him screamed or even suggested a good student in a conventional sense. But art lives in the soul (however you want to define that), and I could sense his ability from the first moment I encountered him. He was sitting in the back, a gold chain around his wrist, a cap like the one he wears now except it had NY on it instead of the Nike emblem.

He didn't come onto me, didn't say or do anything inappropriate. I was the one who would brush my arm against his. I'm not sure he even noticed, but I felt myself come alive at the touch. One day I was making the rounds commenting on the students work, and when I looked at his drawings I leaned forward so my breast pushed against his arm. No way he could mistake that.

That was just three weeks ago. All this has happened since the spring semester started. That's how fast I went from a self-righteous smarmy-male-professor basher to a seducer of students. I guess I don't have much room to criticize anymore.

## 1859

*Father has not entered this room today. He hasn't visited Christina at all. He has spent most of the last three days riding Maid of Cotton, a Lipizzaner mare with a beautiful white coat Father bought in Vienna during last summer's visit. He purchased her and shipped her here at no small price because Christina loved her so much.*

*She took to that horse the same way she took to Rome, with a sharp maturity that made her seem more like thirty than thirteen. Certainly she has always seemed older than I (which people we meet usually think), with her dark eyes that peer into you and her way of talking that seems so grown up. Even her posture seems woman-like, coming to her naturally where Mother always scolds me for not keeping my chin up. Parmenas has no idea how lucky he is not to be a girl.*

*"Mother, why isn't Parmenas in this portrait?" I ask.*

*“Please do not speak, young lady,” says Mr. Lubitz.*

*“Abigail,” Mother says again.*

*I do not reply but try to keep my face set.*

*“We’ll have one with him too,” Mother says. “But I want my two young ladies together in this portrait forever.” Her voices catches, and for a moment I feel my own chest lurching, and I want to tell Christina I’m sorry and that of course I love her and would never not want to touch her. But again this is not Christina, and that’s what feels so wrong. I want to shut my eyes, shut this scene out. But I know when I do I will see her dark piercing eyes.*

*I can’t help but cut my eyes to hers now, hoping to see them gleaming in their dark black-brown knowing depths.*

*But I can’t. All I see are the eyeballs painted on her sewn-shut lids. Apparently most photographers paint them on the photograph, but not Mr. Lubitz because he thinks it looks more natural on the eyelids themselves.*

*“Ach!” Mr. Lubitz says.*

*“Abigail! You are ruining everything!”*

*I know I am, bending over sobbing.*

*“Young lady!” Mr. Lubitz exclaims as he leaps from behind the camera, and I realize I have tipped Christina over, pitching her forward out of the stand.*

## **2017**

I let my gaze cut to Jesus’s arm now. It’s sheathed in that shiny material, but I know its thickness underneath, and I remember how his arms felt holding me, strong and muscled. *I* asked *him* out last Friday, claiming to want to talk about his art. Which I did, because it was so good. I didn’t have just lust for him. He had every promise of being a really good artist, maybe even a great one. We made love that night, and then he left right after and went off somewhere in Lake Worth and was shot, maybe by a drug dealer, or gang members. Oh, I sound like the man in the White House. For all I know, it was probably the police who killed him. News of it unzipped Palm Beach State like a bodybag. I sensed it before I actually found out he’d been killed. I felt that pummeled sensation, and it hasn’t left me.

What kind of funeral is this, standing somebody up like a doll in the corner?

As if reading my thoughts, his aunt tells me, “This is a different kind of funeral, yes? We are Puerto Rican, and lots of us do funerals this way recently. It is called *muerto parao*. Like standing up the dead. It’s like we have one more time with Jesus.”

“It’s . . .” I start, not sure what to say.

“Different,” she finishes.

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

I wonder if this is what he would have wanted? A classroom is such a strange artificial space. The teacher sees only one side of the students, the students only one side of the teacher. Jesus had no reason to show me any other parts of his life. He was probably in reality very different from the person I knew him to be. The person I . . . loved. I’m letting myself claim that word.

Or maybe it’s his family who doesn’t know or understand him. Maybe this event is a grotesque misrepresentation of his life. Although he never said so, I *think* art was very important to him. But maybe I just want it to be. He didn’t tell his family about me. They probably didn’t even know about his ability. Probably didn’t value it.

I look away, feeling tears burning my eyes. And then I see pictures hanging on the back wall. Jesus’s work. Not just drawings but paintings. Paintings of people, of streets of Lake Worth, of just color.

His family did know he was an artist. Why else would they hang these pictures? There’s a long table under them with toys and caps. These are the things he loved, I know it, and here are his paintings with them.

Then I realize—he didn’t *need* to tell them about me. I had nothing to teach him. I was just one more art teacher, just as I was probably one more woman.

I’ve been here long enough. I turn to leave. I should say something to his family, but they are talking to other people. People on the inside of his life where I am not.

Still, part of me wants to walk over and kiss his lips, which are pulled together unnaturally tight. I want to say goodbye. Tell him I love him and am



so proud of him. But he is not here, and I have already given him everything he probably wanted from me or that I had to give him.

**1859**

*The image of Christina falling forward on her face haunts my dreams and wakes me in the middle of the night. I can see her dark, dark eyes, much darker than Mother or Father's. There is something almost Mexican about her. I know because a circus of Mexicans come through here every year and set up on land Father owns close to town. Father loves the circus, especially the trapeze artists. I've seen him sit and watch them fly through the air as if nothing else existed on earth.*

*Mother does not care for the circus or anything in it. She rails against it every time it comes to town, but not in Father's hearing. When I said one time that Christina looked like the Mexicans, Mother snatched me away and told me never to say that again. I've never seen her that mad.*

*Not even when I knocked Christina over onto the floor. She didn't seem mad at all. She just walked over sadly and helped Mr. Lubitz stand her up again.*

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Taylor Hagood is Professor of American Literature at Florida Atlantic University, where he has specialized in the writing of William Faulkner and literature of the United States South, including Gothicism and undeadness in southern writing.

## NEURO-AD-BOOST

ANNA ZIEGELHOF

“If I allow them to get into my brain for four weeks, I’ll be three months closer to debt-free. Seems like a good deal. Economy’s been shit. Can’t find a job. Benefits expiring too.”

“Get into your brain, though? Sounds iffy.”

“It’s FDA approved and everything. It alters your speech center for a while and local companies can buy ad-space in your brain.”

“Sounds pretty science fiction.”

“It’s actually a side-product of some medical advancement. New treatment for neurological conditions.”

“Like what conditions?”

“The ones where you lose control over your speech, can’t get out words anymore and stuff. Aphasia, it’s called, I think. That’s what it was originally created for. But they found this other use. And it means: four weeks of allowing a pill to replace some words I use in my speech center, three months closer to paying back the loan.”

“Sure, yea, I mean, *sounds* good. Is it, though?”

“It’s totally fine. It’ll wear off after a few weeks and I’ll have full control over my speech again and have earned a lot of money.”

#

“You took the pill?”

“Swallowed a *Neuro-Ad-Boost: Change Your Family’s Life Forever*, yes.”

“What?”

“Oh, I guess I can’t say the word *Neuro-Ad-Boost: Change Your Family’s Life Forever* anymore.”

“Pill? You can’t say the word ‘pill’ anymore?”

“*Neuro-Ad-Boost: Change Your Family’s Life Forever*. Yes. Guess not. Whatever. No big *Deals Deals Deals Buy And Sell At Leandro’s Used Car Lot At The Airport Car Mall*.”

“Fucking hell.”

“Shit.*ty Internet Connection? Get Ultimate Fiber Fire 5G Not Available in Alaska and Hawaii Terms and Conditions Apply.*”

“I think I’m just gonna talk to you in four weeks. This is sort of annoying. No offense.”

“No, wait *Credit Card Pre-Approved Sign Up Now!*”

“You’re sounding like the worst of the internet threw up on cable TV. Remember cable TV? Well, I do now. Because of you. What words can you even still say?”

“I didn’t know.*ledge Is The Future Classes at University of California Berkeley Extension Start Every Trimester it was gonna be this Bad Case of Restless Legs Syndrome Talk to Your Doctor about Remediol Remediol Is Not For People Who Are Currently...*”

“I’m outta here.”

“*...Breastfeeding, Pregnant, Have High Blood Pressure or Suicidal Thoughts. No! Help! Is Near For Your Rodent Problem Call Zachary’s Rodent Control.*”

“Maybe we can use text until you’re better.”

#

“Hey! You’re backyard *Patio Furniture Sale At Home Stores Nationwide!*”

“You still sound... But it’s been...”

“Errr...”

“So, I gotta tell you *Something Not Going Your Way? Call Gondell and Liscuit Attorney’s at Law.*”

“Errr!”

“I’m doing *Neuro-Ad-Boost: Change Your Family’s Life Forever*, too now. Got a big tax bill’s *overwhelming you? Try Neuro-Ad-Boost.*”

“Arrrrr!”

“What are you trying to say...?”

“It’s permanent *Make-Up Solutions To Fit Your Needs and Budget!*”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anna Ziegelhof is an academic whose work explores the intersection of sociology and biblical studies. Her stories have appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Shoreline of Infinity*, *The Future Fire*, and the *Footsteps in the Dark* anthology (Flametree Press). In addition to working in academia, she has worked as a language instructor, editor, translator, computational linguist, and currently as a UX Writer in tech.

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## THE DAGGER OF OMAHUNDRO

JOSEPH ARTHUR MANN

As the most senior members of my research group, I can trust you with the secret I am about to tell. I was there when Apostle Professor Zogodrov made his now universally-known announcement: he had found the legendary Dagger of Omahundro. I stood not five feet away from him when, at that very same press conference and as proof of the Dagger's veracity, he brutally killed Apostle Misha Wagner, a long-time rival. You have heard about these events as history, but there is so much more to heaven and earth than is found in history. If I am discovered here, if I suddenly disappear, I want you to know why, and I want you to carry on my mission. The truth must be spoken, and I will speak it now.

More than anything else, that day is etched into my memory with crisp edges. Zogodrov stood outside the Holy Temple of The Faith of The Will behind a podium perfectly framed for the cameras. The newly risen sun was all the lighting he needed to set the stage for what he must have thought would be his ascension. I was just grateful that the sun offered me some warmth on that cold morning. I cannot help but think that he chose that morning deliberately, it being the eve of the annual Red Dawn celebration, but perhaps it was divine will.

You might wonder at my presence, that I was part of a world-historical event, but life is funny that way. Though now an obscure professor of anthropology, I was then a sacred archaeologist who had just completed my doctoral studies and was serving as one of Zogodrov's research assistants on the search that uncovered the dagger he believed to be the sacred Dagger of Omahundro.

I stood there near Apostle Professor Zogodrov as he explained the significance of his find with great solemnity: "The Faith of The Will is unusual to outsiders," he said motioning to the press that had been called to attendance, "I see many foreigners in the ranks of the journalists here today. I thank you, as I thank all of you, for taking an interest in the religious history and—I think it only right to say—in the religious present and future of our nation.

"Our most holy faith is founded on the idea of the immortal and perfectible nature of humanity's collective will. Through this will's strength,

our nation stepped over ignorant poverty to become the people of pure power and action that you know today. Our faith's doctrines made this possible. The most central artifact of our religion is the Dagger of Omahundro: it was instrumental in the very birth of our religion. With it, our founding father Omahundro killed the man who blocked his way to this very site on which we now stand, the Holy Temple grounds. The aftermath of this event was miraculous because the people of Rotzlia, the name of Marchtsatsia before its awakening on The Red Dawn, firmly believed in the immorality of killing another human being. Yet, the people witnessed this killing and did nothing. Indeed, they not only ignored the killing but also rose up to follow Omahundro as Apostles of The Red Dawn.

“Our most sacred scriptures declare that anyone who possesses this sacred Dagger of Omahundro may kill with impunity, provided he uses the Dagger to do so. I am humbled by the spirit of our savior, that man of greatness, Omahundro that I have been led to this legendary Dagger and may now present it to his people's eyes once more for the first time in one thousand years!”

Zogodrov unveiled the Dagger to the crowd, pulling it from the breast pocket of his overcoat. It had a simple design with a curved blade and a serpentine handle that fit through the fingers, interlocking the Dagger with one's hand. He held it up like any precious artifact and then locked his fingers around it as Omahundro must have done all those years ago—if this dagger proved authentic.

Suddenly from the crowd, a confident voice rose up above the camera clicks and reverent mumbling: “What evidence do you have that it is the real Dagger?”

“I'm so glad! You anticipated the next part of my announcement!” came the jovial reply from Zogodrov. “As you would see upon inspection, the metal alloy matches those used at the time, it was dug from the same layer of sediment that matches the first Red Dawn, and it was unearthed in the region of Marchtsatsia from which Omahundro came. It only makes sense that it would be returned there in reverence for its own burial when he died.”

The voice rose from the crowd again. This time, the people around where it came from parted to reveal Misha Wagner: “But, Apostle Professor Zogodrov, why would they separate the Dagger from the most holy body of Omahundro? Why would the Dagger be transported back to the region of his birth and only then buried if it was yet extant at his death? How can you

explain the absence of the Dagger from the burial items left in the actual tomb of Omahundro in the crypt of the Holy Temple?”

I noted a slight tone of annoyance in Zogodrov’s voice as he responded: “Apostle Wagner, as with all matters pertaining to the actions of great men in the past, no one yet living can say confidently why things are done in this or that way, but all of this item’s material circumstances match the legendary Dagger, including its physical appearance, which we can now match to the description cryptically given in the scriptures: ‘like a beast without limbs, it binds itself fast to the will of the bearer, a blade that opens the way to his stepping over.’”

Wagner advanced toward the podium where Zogodrov and I were standing, along with the other two research assistants. He spoke as he ascended the steps: “Why can you not simply admit, Apostle Professor Zogodrov, that your evidence is not definitive and cannot be? The Dagger legend surely represents not a literal dagger but an idea, the one that gave birth to our glorious religion. We already have the Dagger: it is in our scriptures.” Wagner chuckled slightly as he finished his statement.

The Dagger still interlocking his fingers by its undulating hilt, Zogodrov stood silent for a moment and then smiled. Chuckling, he began to move toward Wagner with his arms outstretched: “Perhaps you are right, my old friend. We are of two minds, but one religion.” He stopped one step above Wagner’s and, looking down at him, rested his hands on his shoulders, the dagger still fastened around his fingers. “I have yet more evidence for you to consider,” said Zogodrov with a diminishing tone as he looked deeply into Wagner’s eyes. Like a snake’s lunging strike at its handler’s gentle hand, Zogodrov reared back and plunged the Dagger into Wagner’s middle. Save for Zogodrov, all in attendance mirrored the look of surprise and pain on Misha’s face.

Like lightning, this moment instantly struck every Apostle who stood there on the steps of the Holy Temple. The dilemma was simple: if this really was the Dagger of Omahundro, then Zogodrov’s action must be met with impunity. But, if the dagger wrapped around Zogodrov’s fingers was not that of Omahundro, then he had just committed murder and must be arrested. Reality hinged on our reaction. If we did nothing to detain Zogodrov, then the dagger would have to be considered real, and if it was indeed the Dagger, we should do nothing. On the other hand, if anyone attempted to detain Zogodrov, then that would be a sign that the dagger was not Omahundro’s, but could it not also be a sign that those attempting to stop him lacked the true faith, as the



enemies of Omahundro fought back against him and his Apostles as The Red Dawn swept over our land? The foreigners chattered in confusion and disbelief; we Apostles met Medusa's gaze.

Misha's body tumbled down the steps of the Holy Temple. Zogodrov produced a kerchief and wiped the dagger's blade as he slowly walked back to the podium: "As you all can see," he said with a long draw, "the Dagger has been used to kill with impunity. No other dagger in the world has this property. Thus, it is without a doubt the legendary and most holy Dagger of Omahundro!" Zogodrov raised the dagger in his hand above his head in triumph, smiling with innocent enthusiasm.

I ran down the steps to Apostle Wagner's body. He might need help, might still live, I thought. If I couldn't decide what to do about Zogodrov, I could at least help the man he stabbed. I wondered if this would be seen as a sign of apostasy, but a human life—how could I stand by and watch it slip away?

Members of the foreign press noticed my intent and some moved with me to check on Misha. Others stood dumbfounded or filmed and gleefully took pictures. I rolled Misha over and searched for a pulse. None. I checked his breathing. None. I realized a man had just been killed for his ideas: murdered because he stood in the way. A man was killed, and I couldn't even say if it was salvation or sin.

With a moral battle raging in my soul, my mind struggled to make sense of this situation in the sight of Wagner's pitiful form. Then spoke Salchinski, another of Zogodrov's research assistants and someone I knew from personal experience to be a political climber. He cried out with sudden joy: "the savior reborn! Witness the new Omahundro!" Then he knelt in reverence to Zogodrov. Every Apostle in the area looked with frantic fear to see what the others were doing. I must confess that I did so as well.

Either this was the Dagger or it wasn't. It was either heaven or hell for Zogodrov, no more or less. But, I had no idea which he deserved. My faith was strong, and this situation was not simply a matter of deciding what I wanted in this situation and choosing to do it. It was not a matter of politics. I needed to know the truth. Salchinski was not a devout Apostle; I couldn't rely on his actions, and every other Apostle there to whom he wasn't a stranger knew this as well.

I can only attest with certainty to my own thoughts at the time, but I strongly suspected that every other Apostle of true faith in the crowd was also

having trouble reconciling Zogodrov's behavior, petty and self-aggrandizing, with the idea that he was somehow the wielder of our religion's holiest relic. Even beyond his behavior in this moment, I had worked with Zogodrov for years, and I knew he was no world-historical man, no man of universal will. He was small-minded, good at advancing himself.

No other Apostles moved to join Salchinski, and this swept the smile from his face. He looked around with comic surprise, like a man proposing marriage who receives no reply, and started to step up and away from Zogodrov. At the same time, one other Apostle, a skinny man unfamiliar with Salchinski, took and quickly aborted a step forward, as if to indicate that he was about to join Salchinski but hesitated at the latter's withdrawal. Seeing this, Salchinski lunged forward again to his former position, but seeing the scrawny man stop, he pretended like he was tying his shoe and then stood up.

Just then, when every Apostle in the crowd would have rather died than remain where they stood, two temple guards, having seen the incident play out, arrived on the scene and began to assess the situation. They instinctively identified Zogodrov as the one who killed Misha and moved to each side of the dagger-wielding Apostle to restrain him. Noticing this, Zogodrov thrust the dagger into the air and said, "Apostle guardsmen, this dagger is the Dagger of Omahundro rediscovered! I have killed with impunity to show its veracity!" His confidence somewhat shaken at the imminent threat of arrest, Zogodrov managed to assert his message credibly enough to check the temple guards briefly.

Both guards looked to one another for an indication of what to do. Like the rest of us Apostles in the crowd, they too met Medusa's gaze, that is, until a voice rang out over their radios saying, "Bring them. Zogodrov and his assistants." Four more temple guards had arrived.

We three assistants and Zogodrov were brought into the Holy Temple, past all of the places I had been before. We moved down corridors that I didn't even know existed, until we arrived in what appeared to be a meeting room, nestled high in one of the minarets of the structure. There was a long, wooden table in the shape of a dagger, and around it sat six individuals: three men and three women. Then, I understood clearly that this was the meeting room of the High Council of Apostles. High Council members are revealed to the public at the next Red Dawn after a current Council member dies. Yet, they are not elected or chosen by the current members of the Council but are revealed through the Holy Spirit of Omahundro. It has been curious, however, that they always manage to come from the same six families.

“Leave them with us,” said a young woman who rose from her seat nearest the door and moved in our direction, stopping in front of Zogodrov. “What happened outside on the steps just now?”

“High Apostle Junko, it is an honor to meet you in person. I am Apostle Professor Zogodrov, and I am honored to announce that I have found the legendary Dagger of Omahundro!” he said triumphantly as he raised it, still woven around his hand. The smile on his face gradually faded as he noticed that the face of High Apostle Junko remained as unmoving marble.

“Let me see this dagger,” said Junko with all the emotion of a cactus. Zogodrov handed her the dagger, uncoiling it awkwardly from his hand. High Apostle Junko was from the family that claims, though the Bastoks dispute it, that their ancestor was the first to follow Omahundro in the first Red Dawn. Her father had been a High Apostle before her, and by the grace of Omahundro, she was revealed as his replacement soon after his death.

“Why do you say this is *the* Dagger?” High Apostle Junko looked over every aspect of the dagger as Zogodrov explained. “...and as I just demonstrated outside a moment ago, I have used the Dagger to kill with impunity, which means that it must be the Dagger of Omahundro!” His enthusiasm childlike, his eyes aflame, Zogodrov stood in ecstasy as he awaited the devotion of the High Council.

“I am afraid,” said High Apostle Junko with a long draw, “I find it hard to believe.”

High Apostle Junko continued to turn the dagger over in her hands. She felt the sharpness of the blade; she ran her finger along the course of the undulating hilt, tracing it from tip to tip. Zogodrov looked at me for the first time since the press conference had begun, and I saw the brightness in his eyes as he continued to smile.

High Apostle Junko slipped the dagger onto her hand: “I’m afraid that this cannot be the Dagger of Omahundro.”

“But what makes you say that, most esteemed High Apostle Junko?” said Zogodrov with quiet quickness.

“Because,” she said as she put her hand on Zogodrov’s shoulder and patted it three times, “we are the Dagger of Omahundro.” She suddenly thrust the dagger into Zogodrov’s chest, like a cat meets kindness with claws.

I had already seen one murder that day, but it shocked me anew the second time to see a High Apostle kill my research team leader so gruesomely. I froze, just as we all had done after Zogodrov stabbed Misha.

“This man,” High Apostle Junko said loudly as Zogodrov fell to his knees and then onto his side, “is a murderer and has been condemned.” She looked at me and the other two research assistants, but her eyes rested on mine as she said, “Condemned by the state. The state is the Dagger of Omahundro: Only the state can kill with impunity.” She smiled at the conclusion of her words, a smile so warm and honest that it made me want to be anywhere else.

I cannot explain how I summoned the courage to say this, but I managed to eke out a low, steady tone and say, “How can you know that the state is the Dagger of Omahundro? Current scholarship is divided on the truth of the matter, and...” I trailed off when my mind caught up to my words, “...this dagger does meet all of the...necessary...criteria...” Instinct brought my arms forward in a prayerful gesture.

“You may be right,” said High Apostle Junko as she bent down and wiped the dagger on Zogodrov’s jacket; “this may be the actual Dagger of Omahundro. That I killed Apostle Professor Zogodrov is no detraction, as I am not a true believer in the Will. I’m sure you understand what it means that I have admitted this to you. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter if this is the true Dagger, as this trinket has been lost for a thousand years, and in that time we, the High Council, not this piece of metal, attractive as it is, have kept this religion and this state moving ever onward and upward toward the fulfillment of human perfectibility.” Smiling the whole time, she walked over to the table and sat the dagger down then turned and leaned back on the table as she gently crossed her ankles.

One of the other six High Apostles, this one a young man, suddenly said, “We on this side of the table are true believers, but we have plausible deniability in this instance, since High Apostle Junko was the one who killed Zogodrov. And, if no one ever uses the dagger again, we’ll have no way of knowing if it is real.” Then, I recognized the young man as High Apostle Feraponte. He had grown a beard since he was installed on the Council two years ago.

“Why...” I hesitated, but, assuming I was about to be killed anyway, I summoned what courage I had left at least to seek the truth of the matter: “Why would true believers work with atheists?”

At that moment, Salchinski had also found enough courage to be himself: "I, for one," he said, falling to his knees in supplication, "thank this most High Council and especially High Apostle Junko for bringing justice to this murderer! Omahundro be praised! The state be praised! I will say only this much to any who ask!" He smiled as one who finding an unexpected treasure will marvel at it in his hands.

High Apostle Feraponte ignored Salchinski and continued to address me: "Who can say how the Will moves in time? We do what we must for the greater good. Is it not noble for us to look past differences to work together?" He too smiled at me as he stroked his beard from chin to chest.

"I have dedicated my life to seeking the truth of our religion's past. I...begrudge you not your duty and obligations, but I must know what is true about this dagger. I must know if Zogodrov was a murderer or a prophet." I found some comfort and resolve in my selfless zeal; I fully expected it to lead to my death. As I said this, Apostle Assistant Delev, who had done nothing at all up to this point, began to move erratically, looking back and forth from me to Salchinski. After I had finished my words, he fell to his knees and repeated Salchinski's words like a prayer he had learned by heart as a child.

"What is your name, Apostle Professor...," said High Apostle Junko as she picked up the dagger, re-threaded her fingers through it, and walked toward me.

"I am Apostle Assistant Doctor Karamazov, not yet an Apostle Professor, High Apostle Junko." If death would be mine today, I would at least die like a man.

"Oh, no, Apostle Professor Karamazov, you are an Apostle Professor, or you will join Zogodrov," said High Apostle Junko as she put her hand on my shoulder and smiled. She patted me three times and winked. I did my best to acquit myself in a way I would like to be remembered, even if this story never was to be told truly. She walked over to Salchinski and patted him on the head. "You are so afraid to die that you would agree to anything." She looked at him and Delev as they simpered and nodded their heads. Like a combine catching a coat, she seized Salchinski's hair and dragged his neck to the knife, cutting his jugular in one swift motion. Delev fell backward and began to retreat from her with one arm forward.

"You disgusting worm," said High Apostle Ballenev, who sat on the side of the non-believers, as he briskly walked to Delev's right side from across the room and began striking him in the head. Once Delev ceased to fight back,

High Apostle Junko stepped up, and with a nod of thanks and a smile to High Apostle Ballenev, she reached down and sliced Delev's neck.

"The dagger may yet be real," said High Apostle Junko with her characteristic smile, "for I have just killed with impunity twice!" She chuckled as she again wiped the dagger clean, this time on Delev's coat, and she and High Apostle Ballenev returned to the table.

"They died because they had no principles," said High Apostle Feraponte with a good-natured smile. "They only seek to benefit themselves. When they see an opportunity to betray, they take it. You are not that kind of man. You would die for what you believe. You, we can use. You, we can work with. You know what will happen if you betray us."

Having put the dagger on the table again, High Apostle Junko walked back to me, standing face-to-face. She put her hands on my shoulders, and as she smiled and cocked her head to the side, she pulled me into a hug and kissed me on both cheeks. "You will serve the greater good, the perfection of human Will, will you not? It is already the commandment of your religion; you need only to accept that you do not know if the dagger is real, and cannot know. You need only to tell the people that Zogodrov was a murderer and that he had been brought to justice. You will continue to look for the Dagger, but you will never find it. You will become wealthy, you will be given a beautiful wife, your children will live a life of joy and strength, and in some generations, your people may mix with our people and become a part of the High Council. You have shown us your worth, and the strength of your will shall be rewarded." All of the members of the High Council tipped their glasses to me, and High Apostle Junko gazed expectantly into my eyes with her arms still on my shoulders.

#

Later that day, I stood on the steps of the Holy Temple at the same podium where Zogodrov had stood. The reporters swarmed and took their pictures as they waited for my announcement. My research assistants, newly arrived from the University, all stood beaming at the honor. I looked up at the setting sun and said, "Apostle Professor Zogodrov has been found guilty of murder, and his punishment has been swift. The evidence we have suggests that the dagger he found was not the Dagger of Omahundro. We will continue the search, and if Omahundro wills it, we will one day find this legendary and most holy item. Thank you; that is all."

Almost immediately after the press conference was over, and I had spoken with my assistants and some members of the press, I began to plan my escape. I contrived a research expedition to a neighboring nation, one unofficially run by the High Council of Marctsatsia as a client state but ostensibly independent and open to heretic states. We were sent with a government minder to ensure our return, but I managed to lose all members of my expedition party—they had unexpected car trouble—in a remote location. I needed then only to board a train to freedom: this was before the digital age made tracking someone effortless, and after much additional travail, I ended up here where I started my life anew.

This is my story, my dear students. I have not given up on my religion, but I have come to the conclusion that the true Faith of The Will has not yet been realized on earth. It was corrupted immediately after Omahundro's death. But, in this new land, I have worked tirelessly to spread the faith to you in secret, my new Apostles. Together, when the time is right, and it is too late to stop us, we will find the Dagger of Omahundro and bring about a new Red Dawn. Where your parents were taught to hate my faith, I have taught you to cherish it. We cannot know the truth, I've made peace with that now. Omahundro set this dilemma before me to prove that it was impossible to make the right choice on the basis of the truth, for the truth can only come from knowing the future. Instead, he showed me that I have the Will, my will, and this faith in myself will lead us to perfect the will of mankind and bring about a heaven on earth. I will not be corrupted by the greater good. I am a far better man than those who sit on the high council. I will make my own truth.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joseph Arthur Mann's recent research focuses on early modern England and includes articles and presentations on music as ethical instruction, the political power of praising music, musical literature, and the use of music as political propaganda, which he discusses in his monograph, *Printed Musical Propaganda in Early Modern England*, the inaugural title in NABMSA and Clemson University's new Studies in British Musical Cultures series. His other scholarly and fiction works can be found in *Musica Disciplina*, *The Musical Times*, and *AcademFic*. You can find his music and commentary on YouTube @Harmonianism and @GreatBooks-GoodLife.



## PERHAPS, NOT

GREGG SAPP

Professor Ona Sonta had three sets of business cards; she kept them in separate stacks, side by side, on a shelf behind her desk. On cards in the first stack, beneath her name, degree credentials and institutional affiliation, her professional title was listed as “director.” The other cards were identical save for the title—those in the second stack identified her as a “professor of library science,” and on the third, she claimed the designation of “suicidologist.”

She removed a card from the first stack, which was the shortest, handed it to Echo Adams, and said, “I do understand, of course, that this decision is distressful for you. But however, you have my assurances, coming from all my heart, that I will manage your kind donation with the very utmost respect.”

Echo examined the card. Apart from its printed information, it was plain, eggshell white. It looked like it might be homemade. Its simplicity contrasted with the engraved bronze plaque on her office door that read, Director of The Ohio State University’s International Depository for Terminal Correspondence. Didn’t a person with such a distinctive title deserve a business card with some kind of official logo or seal on it? This did not reassure her that this place was legitimate.

Émile also held out his hand to request a card. Echo noticed that Ona Sonta took it from the third stack.

“I offer to you my sincerest condolences,” she said. Ona Sonta had a slight Eastern European accent, a subtle lingering on vowels and misplaced stress on hard syllables, with a gravitas that seemed appropriate for her vocation.

“I, well, wasn’t sure. It’s hard. I’m still processing...” And that was as far as Echo could get before erupting into tears.

Seated next to her, Émile put a hand on her knee and whispered, “Be strong, *chérie*.”

Ona Sonta handed her a box of tissues. “You are having normal feelings,” she assured her, “although knowing so does not make it any more easy to cope.”

Echo dabbed her eyes. “I can’t keep it. I know that for sure. But it wouldn’t be right just to throw it away, would it?”

“Personally, I do not believe that there is any way more right or wrong to deal with these feelings. Professionally, on another hand, my promise to you is that your donation would be honored as a valuable addition to my collection.”

Echo said, “thank you,” but she wasn’t sure for what—the professor’s moral support, or her assessment of the potential donation.

Émile exhaled a slow breath that she interpreted as empathetic, but also suggested his mood was shifting toward impatience.

“There’s no need for you to decide today,” Ona Sonta continued. “If you have any reservations whatsoever, then please you should leave. I’d rather lose a donation than a client’s respect.”

As if to reinforce that message, she said nothing more. In the ensuing silence, Echo raised her head and, for the first time since entering the room, felt excused to look around.

She didn’t know exactly what she expected Professor Ona Sonta to look like—some kind of a cross between an unctuous mortician and a stern librarian, perhaps; but she certainly never would’ve guessed that the curator of the world’s only archive of suicide notes would be such an elegant woman. When Echo arrived for her appointment, Ona Sonta answered the door within seconds of her pressing the bell and greeted her with “Felicitations.” She offered a two-handed handshake, multiple bracelets glinting and tinkling on her wrists, then invited Echo to enter with a sweeping gesture, like a real estate agent showing a new home to a potential buyer. She was dressed in a long, blue pleated dress with a rounded neckline, beneath a matching jacket with embroidered fleur-de-lis designs on its lapels. Her hair, streaked with silver, was cut in a chin-length bob and parted to reveal a broad, unblemished forehead, the likes of which Echo always associated with deep thinking. High temples sloped into shallow eye sockets; her irises were grayish blue. Her lips plumped when she spoke, then deflated into thin lines to listen.

The professor’s desk was gray steel, the kind that Echo considered more appropriate for the office of an auto shop or a loading dock. Attached to it was an L-shaped extension with a computer and a large, curved-screen monitor. The screen savers flashed a rotating sequence of striking color photographs taken from the Webb Space Telescope. Behind her desk, the door

to the stored collections was closed, with a sign above it that read, "Enter by Permission Only." Echo shivered pondering what lies beyond.

"Perhaps it would be useful to help if I told you more information about this depository."

"I visited the web page," Echo said.

"Which provides only the most basic information, so that serious patrons will seek to make direct contact with myself. This also discourages pranks."

"Pranks?"

"Unfortunately, this is so. There are such people."

Echo noticed how when she said this, Ona Sonta glanced at Émile.

"There is not another collection like this anywhere in the world. Yes, this is a department of the state university, but it relies more upon gracious private funding to support its mission than unreliable monies from the state. Every artifact I receive is thoroughly processed, cataloged, indexed, and kept in both its physical form and but is also digitized. Part of this institution's function is to memorialize the persons whose words are preserved herein. We encourage loved ones to visit. However, to prevent any possibility of misuse, we do have careful regulations about who may make use of our materials, and how. This is a research institution. Scholars come from all over the whole world to analyze the content of people's final thoughts.

"When I tell people this, they are often skeptical. There is yet still a stigma attached to the study of suicide. But however, I have dedicated all my life's work and resources to the goal of suicide *prevention*. If I were ever able to close the archive because there was no longer any need for its services, I would be very happy, indeed I would."

"*J'en doute,*" Émile mumbled for only Echo to hear; she elbowed him in the side, then turned to Ona Sonta and said, "All right. I'll do it. I'll donate the letter..."

That was as far as she got before again breaking down into heaving sobs and cascades of tears. The sudden outpouring caught her off-guard, like a seizure. She pressed her face against Émile's chest and wept, rubbing her brow into his ribs, until he steadied her with an arm around her shoulder.

Émile raised his neck when he spoke; "*Peut-être, madame,*" he said to Ona Sonta, "We can arrange to meet again in a few days."

Echo was relieved that he'd spoken on her behalf, thereby deflecting the professor's attention away from her. The gist of her pain was anger, which she worried might show, to her discredit.

"Yes, certainly of course. Come back at your convenience."

"*Allons-y*," Émile said to Echo, helping her to her feet.

"Thank you for your kindness," Ona Sonta said to them on their way out the door, then added, as she was shutting it behind them, "And it was good to see you again, Émile."

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Professor Ona Sonta's job was more a calling than a career. It was the only job she'd ever had. When her father finally embraced his own demise, he left his entire personal collection of terminal correspondence, acquired during 20 years as a hospital administrator in Vilnius under Soviet rule, to the university with gratitude for its assistance facilitating his immigration. The sole condition for this gift was that his daughter, who knew the collection better than anybody other than himself, oversee the establishment and eventual operations of this unique repository. After thirty years of service, she had no plans to retire, ever.

She came to think of her vocation as filling a societal need, but one that nobody else was willing, able, or had the necessary perspective to dispatch. It required a balance of altruism and stoicism to do this job. Committing to it was pretty much a lifetime assignment—there were no opportunities for advancement in a field where she was the only practitioner, and even lateral mobility was limited because the unusual experiences of this position provided few transferable skills.

That being so, she was resigned to working alone. Most of her clients, she never met more than once. Her nominal boss, the dean of the university library, seldom visited the archive, as if relieved to leave it to her. Her few colleagues she knew primarily by email. Most of the institution's benefactors preferred to remain anonymous.

But solitary work didn't completely suit her. Occasional intercourse with a smart, inquisitive person helped to keep the job from becoming morbid. Furthermore, running the archive was enough work to warrant another full-time staff member. Rather than assume the responsibility of managing human resources, Ona preferred to conscript interns from the library school at Kent

State. For one academic semester per year, if there was any interest (often, there were no takers), she hired a student to perform a guided internship at the archives for minimum wage and six academic credits.

Émile Dujardin was the best intern she'd ever had. He was also the only one that she ever had to fire.

She hired him after just a phone interview for reasons that, upon retrospection, she realized were biased and haphazard. His accent reminded her of the summer she spent in Paris as a young woman. He was in the USA on an F-1 student visa, which was how she, too, first came to America. He pronounced her name correctly on the first try. Most persuasive, though, was how when she asked him if he had any questions for her, he gushed, "*Ici, c'est incroyable*. Never was I imagining that dossiers such as these existed. I find it *très* fascinating."

Ona had never heard anybody describe the collections of her archive in such superlatives. "Unique," "distinctive," and "unusual" were the most common attributions. The dean of libraries referred to them as "rare," which indeed they were, for every acquisition was one-of-a-kind. At the last state library association conference, Ona overheard a colleague refer to her realm as "macabre."

On his first day on the job, Émile was waiting outside when she turned the sign in the door from "Closed, Kindly See Our Hours" to "Open by Appointment Only." When talking to him on the phone, she'd formed the impression of a debonair bohemian, wearing a beret and a scarf tied in a loop knot. In person, he was shorter than her, with eyeglasses so thick they made his eyes bug out. He always kept a 3"x5" spiral notebook in the breast pocket of his shirt, and often took it out to scribble down some sudden inspiration.

Ona gave him a tour of the facility. It was one of three suites in the downstairs of a two-story general office building off Indianola Avenue, against Walhalla Ravine. There were three rooms, the smallest of which, and the only with a window was the reception area where her desk was located. She spent little time there, except to meet with clients, donors, and supporters. Most of the work was done in the processing area, immediately behind the door on the other side of her desk. This was a dimly lit area with a flat-top table, atop which was a letter sorter, a clock radio, and a shoe box full of pencils, and beneath was a locked file cabinet. Across from the table were two computer workstations, one which was crammed with equipment—a scanner, digital camera, a CPU with dual monitors, and miscellaneous office

supplies like a tape dispenser and a vertical file. The other workstation, the more spacious of the two, with a leather upholstered seat, had a laptop on it; this one was reserved for clients.

“Of great importance, you must know that you will work with extremely private and sensitive information,” she said. “You must respect my subjects’ privacy as much as if they still lived.”

*“Bien sûr. I understand.”*

“Each item in my collection must be thoroughly indexed and enhanced with metadata,” Ona explained. “Scholars may ask, for example, for such characteristics a subject’s age at their demise, ethnicity, relationship status, whether the correspondence was addressed to a specific individual or to whom it might concern. I myself developed a thesaurus of keyword terminology related to suicidal ideation that was recognized by the American Psychological Society.”

*“C’est vrai?”*

“Indeed, yes. These letters contain great insights into the human condition. For example, I recently cataloged a set of terminal correspondences written prior to *failed* suicide attempts. One might wonder—is there something in their written words that correlate to a latent desire to live? My database has provided primary source material for five doctoral dissertations and dozens of peer reviewed articles.”

“How did this place come to exist? But, why?”

Ona noted that, like many people, Émile conflated those two questions.

“Follow me,” she said, descending a set of stairs into the temperature and humidity-controlled basement. The long, rectangular room, with a single narrow aisle, was covered from floor to ceiling with filing cabinets and archival shelving filled with rigid boxes.

“Here, my collections are stored.” She stepped aside for him to see. “But in answer to your first question, notice on that wall,” she pointed, “there is a framed artifact. That is the first item cataloged here. Written in 1782, its author is not for certain known, for it was signed by six men. They were soldiers, but so too murderers; they engaged in a bloody massacre of nearly 100 peaceful Christian Indians at Gnadenhutzen, in eastern Ohio. In the weeks after the killings, these six began to have terrible nightmares. They made a pact to sacrifice themselves together in atonement. This letter is their joint statement. By somehow, the letter wound up in a time capsule that was

buried in the statehouse lawn in 1850, then retrieved in 1950. It was sent to the university library.

“Over time, the library acquired more such letters from persons or agencies that did not know what else to do with them. Word of mouth led to more bequests, and from farther away places, eventually from around the world. An anonymous benefactor gave funds start a separate depository in 1990, since when it has grown by many times in size.”

Émile covered his mouth with his hand, at first Ona thought to catch a cough. A chortling, apparently involuntary spasm rose from his esophagus. He swallowed but couldn't hold it in and finally let go with a barrage of laughter.

Dumbfounded, Ona waited for the moment to pass.

He sputtered, cleared his throat, then finally managed, “*Désolé*. I was remembering what Camus said. *Je ne suis pas pourquoi*, but I had to laugh. Sorry.”

“What was the quote?”

“He said, *Il n’y a qu’un problème philosophique vraiment sérieux : c’est le suicide.*”

“My French is not so good. Does this mean that suicide is a seriously true philosophy?”

“*Presque*. It means, “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.”

Ona did not understand nor wish to discuss what this meant, much less why Émile found it humorous. She resumed the orientation by logging onto the computer and demonstrating the basics of entering records into the database. That was the only time she ever heard him laugh.

Émile caught on fast and worked even faster. A month into his internship, he had completely scanned and indexed the backlog of recent acquisitions, and Ona was so pleased with his attention to detail that she assigned him the task of searching for obituaries.

Probably most of all, she appreciated that he asked so many questions. Previous interns seemed wary of analyzing these documents too deeply, as if they had some internal resistance to entering into the minds of their authors. Émile, however, treated each record as if he was preparing to deliver a eulogy for the person. What were the author's personal details? What did the author's handwriting suggest? Where was the letter left to be discovered? On his own

initiative, he developed a ranked system of content retrieval correlating various criteria, such as methods, motives, and demographic data. When he spoke to Ona about his work, he referred to documents' authors by their first names.

"Many regard suicide as an act of love," he said to her one day, "because they believe that their loved ones will be better off without them."

"This is a common delusion of suicidal thought," she answered him.

"Perhaps," he said. "Perhaps, not."

In the final month of his internship, Ona permitted him extraordinary freedom in developing his own projects. That was a mistake, she soon discovered. The author of one recently acquired letter complained that Émile had written to him, and then called, asking painful questions about his unsuccessful suicide attempt. As she subsequently discovered, Émile had presumed to follow-up with several subjects who had left suicide notes but survived the attempt, seeking information about their personal reflections on the experience of wishing themselves dead. He concluded these interviews—if he got that far, which wasn't often—by asking, "Do you ever still think about doing it?" He stored this research in a file that she found in a folder labeled "miscellaneous" in a subdirectory of files from the old Ohio Lunatic Asylum. She assumed that Émile put it there to hide it from her.

Ona was aghast. This violated the basic rule that she'd conveyed to him on his first day. This was an offense that warranted firing. Still, she didn't, instead writing an official letter of reprimand—the first and still only she'd ever written for any intern. She gave it to him personally but asked him not to read it in her presence. If he had any questions she would answer them, but otherwise the letter spoke for itself, so she hoped that there'd be no need to ever speak of it again.

"*Mais non*, madame, I have gathered much very important information..." he began to protest.

Ona made a slicing gesture across her throat to silence him. Émile accepted the envelope from her, eyes heavy with remorse, and muttered, "*Je vous demand pardon*." She winced; she'd become accustomed to him using the informal *tu* with her. He asked to leave work early that day, saying he felt ill, so she bade him to take off as much time as he needed. In parting, she kissed him on both cheeks.



That evening, Émile Dujardin attempted suicide by ingesting a handful of Nembutal tablets. A neighbor found him face down on the floor in the half open door to his apartment, having collapsed apparently trying to leave, perhaps, Ona speculated, during the throes of last-minute regrets when he'd gone seeking help. She later wondered if it had occurred to him to call her, or if not, why.

Ona did not learn of this near tragedy until the following Monday, when she found an envelope with "Professor Sonta" written on it taped to the door of the archive. It began, "Please accept with this letter my apologies for what I must do."

Ona sat on the floor, crossed-legged with her back to the wall, and held the letter carefully, by its edges, while reading it over and over and over. The letter was dated two days earlier. By the time she read it, the act was done—or not. It was somewhat a relief not knowing. Either way, she never wanted to see him again. This time she "let go" of him, so he could concentrate on regaining good health.

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It required her to exercise uncharacteristic forbearance, but Echo was good at reading Émile's reactions, and the way that he bit his lip when Ona Sonta uttered those parting words to him warned her against asking for immediate explanation. Likewise, he avoided saying anything about their visit to the archive, as if to avoid giving her permission to bring up the subject. This led to an awkward drive home, because anything other they tried to talk about felt forced, like small talk that served no purpose save to postpone an inevitable discussion.

For the first time since she couldn't remember when, Émile made her favorite, coquilles saint jacques, for dinner that night. When he served her, she asked, "what's the occasion?" He shrugged, "*rien de special*," and filled her wine glass. His nonchalance seemed guarded.

After dinner, though, when the table was cleared and the dishwasher was running, during the hours of their domestic routine when they drank wine and chatted before turning on the television, the strain of avoiding the subject became more than she could bear. Émile reached for the remote control. Then, finally, Echo broke down and asked the question that had been bugging her ever since they'd left the archive—

“Why did that woman—Professor Sonta—say that it was good to see you again?”

Concurrently with her asking, Émile pressed the power button on the remote. On the screen, the channel five weatherwoman stretched across Franklin County to show a cold front converging from the west.

“It looks like rain,” he said.

Echo tsked. “Really?”

“I was sure that I told you, *n’est-ce pas?*” Émile spoke over the weatherwoman, who predicted “much cooler temperatures.”

Echo extracted the remote from his hand and turned off the television. “No, I’m sure that I’d remember if you did,” she answered him.

Émile removed a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose. “I was knowing her in graduate school,” he explained at length.

“Was she, well, a friend?”

“That, I would not say. We met during my internship. *Vraiment*, I was not knowing her well, and that was by choice. I found her to have a strange air about her.”

That was true, clearly. It took a person with peculiar attitudes and predilections to pursue a career organizing the grim scripts of disturbed minds. Echo could scarcely imagine a more depressing job.

As many times as she’d read the letter that he ex, Monte, clutched in his hand to be discovered along with his hung body, it still set off fresh tremors of revulsion within her. She’d had no idea of the dark thoughts going through his mind. How could she, having rarely seen him since their separation. Even if she had, though, what could she have done?

Nothing! That’s what everybody told her. Why, then, did she feel more anger than grief? And more guilt than anger.

“Did you know that she worked at that depository?” she queried further.

“*Je ne sais pas*. That is, I might have heard something to that effect, from some long time ago. But I was not thinking about her since many years. And if not for the sad news about your Monte, I would never have thought about her again.”

“He is not *my* Monte,” Echo objected, then upon reflection added, “We split up three years ago.”

“Of course, I meant no such a thing. *Mon coeur*, you are absolutely without blame.”

Echo slapped her hands on her lap and cried, “Then why in the fuck did he address that letter to me!”

Émile bowed his head. It wasn’t the first time she’d asked him that question. Previously, he’d responded with various assertions of her innocence and declarations of his affection, but these were condolences, not answers, and that was why she kept asking. Was there something wrong with how she loved? Only Émile could tell her.

“He was not in his right mind,” Émile said. “And so wrote insane things.”

Although she tried to steel her face, she felt the emotion swelling in her cheeks and behind her eyes. “I can’t stand this anymore,” she blubbered. “I have to get rid of that letter.”

“Yes, you should donate it to the repository, where it may perhaps be useful for somebody.”

“That’s the problem! I don’t want anything useful or good to come from it. Monte doesn’t deserve that for doing this to me. I’m going to burn that goddamned letter.”

“*Non, ne le fais pas*. In the contrary, give it to me. That way, you need to have nothing more to do with it.

The letter was in a manila envelope, on the coffee table in front of them. She reached for the envelope and pressed it to her chest, and said, “I should never have let you read it.”

“I want only to help.” Émile put his hands together, palms up, as if begging. “Hand it to me, and I will give it to Madame Sonta. Or I will burn it, as you wish.”

Echo grimaced thinking about her options, none of which appealed to her. She felt her heartbeat accelerating, and growled “mmmmm, ahhhhh” in frustration. At once, she took the envelope in one hand, grasped it by the edge, and tossed it forehand across the room, like a frisbee.

“Burn it,” she said to Émile, “and flush the ashes down the toilet.”

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Émile went without making an appointment, even though he knew that by doing so he risked being turned away. Ona did not like drop-ins, for it signified presumption, or carelessness, or just a general lack of respect. The repository was not the kind of place where a person stopped by on a whim. Furthermore, it was after hours, although he knew that she often worked long after the doors were closed to the public and her car—identifiable by its yellow, green and red Lithuanian flag decal—was parked in the lot. When he rang the doorbell, she answered over the intercom, and Émile introduced himself by asking for five minutes of her time. After a pause, she responded, “Of course. Five minutes is not too much for an old friend. I’ll be at the door momentarily.”

*An old friend?* Émile wondered. He’d never considered her a friend, exactly. But not a boss, either. More akin to a mentor.

Ona unlocked the door, nodded and smiled at him, then shooed him inside, locking the door behind him. Émile was so stunned when she greeted him with a hug that he could not reciprocate with anything more than a pat on the back. She rolled the swivel chair from behind her desk and invited him to sit in it, while she removed a pile of folders from a straight back chair and turned it toward him, straddling the seat backwards.

“I had anticipated you to come back,” she said.

That seemed presumptuous, even though he had, in fact, always intended to return, with or without Echo’s donation. It helped that he had it, though.

“*Merci*,” he said, although he wasn’t sure he should be thanking her.

“Although I also looked forward to seeing Ms. Dujardin, as well. Or am I too bold to assume that she is your wife?”

“Yes, she is *ma femme*. But, by her choice, she did not take my name.”

“Of course, she is American,” Ona surmised.

It sounded to Émile like an implicit insult, although he somewhat agreed with the sentiment. “*Pourtant*, I am bringing the letter,” he said, taking the folder from under his arm and showing it to her. “We discussed much on this subject, before she decided that, yes, she would like to give it to the depository, to you, for your collection.”

“Shall I sign a donor receipt?”

“No.” Émile said, then realized he’d been too quick to reply, so he added, “She is more content to be anonymous.”

“Of course. I know that this was traumatizing for her.”

Émile presented the manila envelope to Professor Sonta in both hands; she accepted it with her left hand and brushed him lightly on the wrist with her right hand. To his mind, the gesture conveyed something more than just professional courtesy. It was as if she was giving him permission to broach the subject he’d really come to discuss.

“Similarly, *à propos* this subject, I would like to ask you, madame, for a favor.”

“Yes.” She said it as a statement, as if she knew what he was going to ask.

“*Je vous demanderais*, that is, I would like to ask, if you please, could you return to me the artifact that I left for you, some years ago, on the final day of my employment.”

She rubbed her chin, as if thinking.

“It was a letter,” he added.

“Oh, I do know to what you refer,” she assured him, “And I know exactly where it is.”

“Then *peut-être* you can understand why I want it returned to me.”

“I do understand why you ask,” she said, even while shaking her head side to side, “But I cannot do this for you. It now belongs to my collection.”

Émile opened his mouth to raise an objection, but nothing came out but a puff of dry air.

“Once written,” Madame Professor Sonta said, “It is as good as done.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gregg Sapp is a former academic librarian and library administrator at four universities, who is taking advantage of retirement to write fiction, nonfiction, and satire.

## REDEMPTION

ALAN WATKINS

John was watching TV when he heard his cell phone going off. It was Jen. They had been fighting earlier, and Jen had said some really hurtful things. He paused his TV show and looked at the phone. He wasn't ready to talk to her, so he threw the phone on the couch and went into the kitchen to get a drink so he wouldn't have to hear it buzzing at him until it went to voicemail. When he got back, he set his full drink on the end table beside him and settled back in to finish the movie he was watching. He must have fallen asleep because he was awakened by a knock at the door. Sleepily, he checked his watch. It was 1am. The knocking continued. As he moved closer to the door, he said, "Who is it?" A voice from outside responded, "Raleigh PD, Mr. Williams." John peered through the keyhole, and sure enough it was the police, so he opened the door. They explained that they had found Jen's car totaled less than a mile from his house. Not knowing who to contact, they found that he was the last person she called and wanted him to come down the next day to identify the body. The rest of their conversation was a blur. John closed the door and sat back down on the couch. He hated that their last conversation had ended with her storming out. He opened his phone to find a picture of her, and noticed he had a message. He was sure it was from Jen and was probably her wanting to get in a few more insults that she'd forgotten to tell him when she was there. A tear ran down his cheek as he clicked the button to hear the message, knowing the words he was about to hear would be his eternal memory of her.

"Hey...it's me. I'm sorry for what I said. I'm just so insecure because I've been hurt before, and being in love with you scares me. Yes, I said it, I love you, John! Please let's just forget all this. Call me in the morning. I love you."

More tears, different than the first, were running down John's face as he ended his voicemail call. "I love you too," he said.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan Watkins teaches computer science courses at NC State University. In his spare time he likes to make short films and write short stories, usually in the horror genre.